

WASP IN THE WEB

The narrator of this novel, Clement Morris, is a 'hard case'; his experiences in the war have left him bitter and harshly indifferent to the preoccupations of his society; he is a rolling stone, usually drunk and always ready for a fight. His predilection for rough-houses is to be allowed full and dangerous scope when he comes into collision with a sinister millionaire and tycoon, Courtney Polaris; Polaris has thugs at his disposal to deal with any opposition—or solitary nuisances like Morris—that may cross his path.

Morris himself is no saint. His enemies are the more credible for the sinister political motivation that drives them. The main threads of this exciting novel of crime and violence lie in the character of Morris, in the strange relationship that develops between him and the beautiful Esther Gannelain, and in the convincing and thrilling accounts of Morris's flight, first from forces that are as ruthless as they are far-reaching, and then from the Police. All the violent action—and there is a great deal of it—takes place in the southern counties of England.

By the same author
PERHAPS I LOOK SIMPLE

Wasp in the Web

R. B. AMOS



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To Patsy

1

IT HADN'T been a good day. There had been another little brush with the head barman who called himself Toni and put it about that he was French with a Riviera hotel background, whereas I knew he was a London-born Maltese and that the farthest he'd ever been out of the country was to a place on the Isle of Wight. He didn't like me for that, to begin with. We had just finished rearranging the battlefield after the lunch-time session and I was struggling manfully back to the hatch under the weight of a napkin from a distant table when he crept up on me and pinned me against the bar, in the corner at one end. He had dark spongy eyes and a long wicked mouth, with a lot of black curls laid like a doormat on top of his skull.

'You've been at the Scotch again, you booze-sodden louse,' he hissed.

A sharp-eyed observer, Toni. Apart from my bloodshot eyes, a slight tendency to drop things and the smell of a distillery on my breath, there had been absolutely nothing to give me away. But you couldn't fool Toni. So I leaned against the wall and waited for it, mumbling the usual formula. 'Just a couple of little ones, Toni. I needed setting up.'

He cracked me across the mouth with the back of his hand and as he wore a square-cut ring—specifically for this kind of work, I should imagine—I got the salt taste of blood against my tongue. My head was already splitting and the blow couldn't make it much worse.

'You needed setting up!' he snarled. 'The amount of free Scotch you've sunk since you've been here is enough to have set you up in your own pub.'

'It wasn't Scotch today, Toni,' I croaked with a placatory smile, 'Kümmel.'

He jabbed me in the solar plexus, a neat, businesslike left hand and I half-turned and fell across the bar, my eyes on a level with the smooth, gleaming surface that slid away down the length of the shadowy room where the air was half-choked with the fumes, the smoke and the silence left behind by the hearty, chattering drinkers. Cheerful, self-satisfied gentlemen in prosperous tweeds and immaculate lounge suits, gorgeous sphinx-eyed ladies with clear, metallic voices, they had departed to golf courses, to show each other their new sports cars, to make the sacrifice of a last hour in the office or to cement a new liaison in a whispering Chelsea bedroom. The ring winked on Toni's hand as it swept up the bar towards me and crashed into my face.

'For Chrissake, Toni,' I gasped, trying to gauge exactly the desperation in my voice. 'That's enough. You know my trouble. I'm having another bad spell.'

It was important to show only the right amount of panic: not enough and Toni would be enraged into getting really nasty; too much and he would persist out of sheer enjoyment of the spectacle. Apparently I had judged it well this time for he seized my coat and pushed me upright against the wall, then stepped back, eyeing me with a noble contempt.

'Another bad spell. You bet I know your trouble. Mr. Clement Morris is feeling sick to think that a man of his talents and experience should be reduced to working in a bar. Terrible, ain't it? Clement Morris, old school tie and all, a common potman. Of course you're too good for it, Clem, we all know that. What we don't understand is why you should

be too good to pour drinks but not too good to pinch 'em. How come, eh?"

I blinked at him miserably and he leered with triumph.

'O.K., Morris, get yourself cleaned up, stick that thick head under the tap, then get back to work. And if you don't keep away from those bottles in future, I'll save you from this terrible life by dropping you on your fanny right outside the back gate. Get moving.'

I blundered around his exultant gaze and took myself out to the washroom. There was a cut between my eyes as well as the one on my lip, but I wasn't much hurt. In spite of everything, I could still absorb punishment, an asset which I looked on as my insurance in the Delville Country Club. Whatever Toni might say, I knew there was little danger of dismissal. He enjoyed bashing me too much for that.

The door opened behind me and Don came in, the sixteen-year-old who worked in the kitchen and helped clean up. I winked at him in the mirror. 'We was robbed, boy. I was just feeling him out. Another couple of rounds and I'd have had him.'

He still looked anxious, poor innocent. 'You all right, Clem?'

'Me? Of course I'm all right. A little blood-letting's good for the complexion.'

He stood blinking at the floor, scowling ferociously. 'What d'you let him do it for, Clem? Why don't you take him? You could kill him if you wanted to——'

'Stow it away, Donald,' I admonished him. 'This is no place for adolescent romanticism. If I thumped Toni I should get the push.'

'Wouldn't it be worth it?'

'When you're my age, junior, you'll know there's not much future in sticking your neck out for fun. Never cut loose unless there's something in it for you—preferably something

green and crinkly with pictures of the Bank of England on it.'

He sniffed. 'One of these days I'll have a do with him myself.'

'Ho, ho,' I roared. 'By the time you're ready for him he'll be a dear, white-headed old chap in a bath chair. You'd feel a bully. Anyhow, young Donald, in seriousness, don't start shoving your chin out. It's time you began to learn the big lesson, the one that sorts out the men from the boys: just you busy yourself in looking after Number One; and the rest of the time, keep your head down. Which leads me to point out that you spend too much time with me to be healthy. Let Toni notice that and he'll start hotting things up for you as well. I'm not saying that because I don't like having you around, Don. I just don't want to see you trip over the starting line. So cut along now and don't forget: self first, self second, self last. And if owt's left over, self again.'

He gave me a long look then said, 'O.K., Clem, if you think that's the best way,' and went out. The door clicked gently shut behind him and I was left with that look to add to the rest of the day's bad things. I was certainly in no shape to encounter Esther Gannelain.

Evening was drawing on, an aloof autumn evening with cloud patterns lithographed on a slatey sky and smudged over in the east towards London, and no breeze save what was struggling to escape from beneath the chestnut leaves. I stood outside leaning against a column near one corner of the low sprawling roadhouse and sucking at a cigarette, staring over the treetops and thinking solemn thoughts when a car hissed up the gravel drive, a red open convertible of Italian make, not quite so big as a motor coach. The contents of the car were as follows: Esther Gannelain; a long-nosed individual with receding hair and a magnificent overcoat; a large, apprehensive-looking boxer dog; and a youngster in a

black leather jacket sharing the back seat with the boxer while Esther drove.

They swept around the bend in the carriageway and on to the front entrance and, falling back to spare them the spectacle of a flunkey lounging about the premises, I lost them from view. I soon met them again, however, when I returned to take post in the bar. Not dark enough to switch on the lights, but with a definitely anaemic late afternoon sun outside the window wall, it was sombre and heavy in there as I idly rubbed a glass and surveyed with baleful hostility the Buddha-like self-sufficiency of the spirit bottles. They soon altered all that. They swept in in a body, headed by the lolloping boxer and Esther screaming in horror, 'Ooh, but it's dark. Lights! Give me some light, for the love of Pete!'

Behind her trooped the long-nosed character, without his beautiful overcoat, and the youngster, a darkly handsome boy, still in his leather jacket. The four of them, including the dog, gave the impression of a thirsty regiment surging into the bar; although apart from Esther all, including the dog, were relatively quiet. While a general scramble ensued to turn on every illumination in the place they seated themselves (except for the dog) on stools and Esther, beaming at me, called, 'Three champagne cocktails and a large bowl of Guinness, please, darling.'

Although I'm ready to swear not a muscle of my face twitched, she was swift to add, 'The Guinness is for the dog.' She leaned across the bar and continued in a confidential stage whisper. 'He's really under age, but promise not to tell. I'm afraid he's an awfully dissolute young dog, like Court, here.'

She nudged with her elbow at the long-nosed man, who wasn't so young as all that.

She herself I judged to be in her thirties, although it was difficult to tell because she had the type of well-boned face

which doesn't age and her pale, clear skin had obviously had a lot of care lavished on it. In one of the wings of her black hair, swept back with a metallic sheen from her temples, there was a bold streak of white, about an inch wide. She wore a suit of some pinkish hue which didn't match her lipstick but lay smoothly over a fashion model figure. Crossing them luxuriously as she perched on the high stool, she made no secret of the fact that her legs were magnificent. I took due note through the agency of the long mirror on the wall at the end of the bar. Setting the cocktails in front of them, I asked gravely, 'How big a bowl would you—would he like, Madam?'

'How big a bowl have you got?'

I stooped and took from the floor under the bar a large enamel basin and swilled it under the tap. When I straightened up, however, Court was holding between his hands a great glass dish of cheese biscuits which always stood on the bar and was in the act of emptying its contents on to the floor. Involuntarily I squawked an indignant 'Hoy!' but the lady was effusive as her gallant presented it with a little bow.

'How simply charming!' she cried, including me in a brilliant smile. 'Pancho will simply love that.'

'Pancho will enjoy his Guinness', I said coldly, dumping my own more prosaic utensil on the bar, 'just as much out of this one. Better, because it holds more.'

She looked from one bowl to the other and shook her head with decision. 'Pancho is a dog of taste. He will much prefer to drink elegantly.'

'Madam,' I insisted, 'that bowl is cut glass. It's as much as my job's worth to use it for feeding porter to a poodle.'

The long-nosed man looked at me coolly. He had the air of one rather enjoying the rumpus.

'Don't let it worry you,' he urged with a spiteful smile. 'It's

not a poodle in any case. Pedigree boxer, an altogether different thing.'

The youngster still said never a word but leaned on the bar with an absolutely impassive face and attentive eyes. The lady resumed with some tartness, 'I like your turn of phrase but not your reasoning. If the thing's so valuable they shouldn't leave it lying around like that. Fill it up.'

It really was cut glass because the Delville Country Club was like that. Perhaps in fact it didn't matter but the kummel and Toni's square-cut ring and Don's long look were still nagging inside my brain and I felt mutinous. Only slightly, of course, but mutinous, nevertheless. So I squared my jaw, gave my bowl a little determined rap and said, 'This one.'

'That one,' she returned tapping the glass dish with equal resolve. 'I'm not going to allow Pancho to drink out of a sort of chamber pot.'

It was just then that Toni came in and, quick to spot trouble, sidled towards us on their side of the bar. He flung a hard look at me and a long one at the nylon legs coiled round the stool.

'Something the matter, Mrs. Gannelain?'

'There certainly is. Your, er—colleague, here, refuses to put Pancho's Guinness in this nice bowl of yours. Insists on using that horrible antiseptic-looking thing he's fished up off the floor.'

Toni knew her name but apparently his information was not quite full enough. He looked around with evident perplexity and his glance settled on the taciturn kid.

'That's going to be an awful long drink, isn't it, sir?'

The youngster spoke for the first time. His lips hardly moved but he enunciated clearly, in a good voice, the words, 'You half-witted ape,' then fell silent and impassive again.

'Pancho,' I corrected Toni, 'is the one over there, wee-weeing against the table leg.'

Mrs. Gannelain giggled helplessly while Toni turned livid with rage. Naturally, however, he wouldn't do anything so stupid as trying to work it off on a customer when he had his favourite whipping boy ready at his elbow and he turned on me furiously.

'Morris, I'm getting very tired of warning you. You'll hear more about this later. Do as the lady says and quick about it, and don't let me hear one more complaint or I'll take care it'll be the last.'

He screwed up a bilious smile for the Gannelain, muttered, 'Please let me know if you have any more trouble, Madam,' and began to move off. Then he paused and gestured towards the scene of Pancho's misdemeanour, fixing me with a malevolent sneer.

'And get that mess cleared up as well.'

Silently I poured the Guinness into the biscuit bowl and Court took it from me with dignity to set before the boxer. Then I took a swab and the rejected enamel bowl, went around the bar and sponged the damp patch in the carpet where Pancho had enjoyed his simple pleasures. Mrs. Gannelain was ever so nice about the whole thing. She even had the grace to murmur, 'Naughty Pancho', with a glance towards the table leg before ordering three more cocktails with her previous gay smile.

From then on they got down to some serious drinking and, as the place began to fill up with the usual crowd, I and the other two behind the bar were kept pretty busy. As for Toni, he seldom did any actual work except where the tips were highest, generally standing about magisterially and keeping an eye on the rest of us. Eventually the noise of the dance orchestra began to throb from beyond the swing doors and Mrs. Gannelain gave the signal to her entourage.

'Come on, all,' she commanded, slipping from her stool. 'The revelry's beginning. I want to cha-cha before I dine.'

They were swallowed up in the thickening press and from then on, fortunately, I had hardly time to think of them. I was too busy scurrying hither and thither, smiling brightly in reply to the urbane commands of the master-minds on the other side of the bar, trying to ignore the gathering fur inside my mouth. 'Yes, sir?' 'Yes, sir.' 'Are you being served, sir?' 'Two Pimms', one Dubonnet and Noilly Prat, three double Scotches and one double gin and tonic. Certainly, sir.' 'Thank you, sir.' 'Thank you very much indeed, sir.'

In my ear Toni muttered, 'Move yourself around, Morris. Don't let down the old school tie.'

'I say, would you *mind*?' A fat woman with powder hanging on her flabby chins like shredded cardboard. 'You've given me far too much Angostura in here. I can't drink it, you know.'

One of those voices that penetrate the babble like a steam saw.

'Very sorry, Madam. I'll change it at once.' Mix another one, wishing it were arsenic and seidlitz powder, stick the first glass under the bar. Pass it on to some other sucker, perhaps, or knock it back myself when no one's looking. But there's Toni's stale oyster eye fixed upon me.

On top of it all, the Gannelain party reappeared, chock-full no doubt with tasty dishes and vintage wines but with a fresh thirst from a work-out on the dance floor. They squeezed their way through the throng to the bar and ordered another round. The row started soon after, quite suddenly. I heard Esther say with exasperation, 'For God's sake, Les, if you must carry on about it take it up with your head man. He's the one who told you to keep away from me.'

She was speaking to the sulky youngster who had turned very white. He stared from one of them to the other, drawing back his upper lip. 'You don't seem exactly broken-hearted

about it,' he remarked savagely. 'The Chief is a straight man; somebody got at him, put him up to this; and it's not hard to guess who.' He shot a fierce glance at Court who gave a pale smile and studied the ceiling. Esther seized her drink and knocked it back impatiently.

'O.K. Take it out of him, in that case. But leave me alone; you interfere with my drinking.'

She stared across the bar with smouldering eyes. Court gestured to me for another round. 'Les,' he remarked, 'you begin to bore me.' His mouth was suddenly prim, his eyes blank. 'Supposing you give more thought to the Movement, and stop pestering Mrs. Gannelain?' Raising his glass, he stared the youngster hard in the eyes. 'Cheers.'

'Cheers,' said Les and did likewise. 'Cheers, Esther.' She half-turned her head to look at him and he flung his drink full in her face. Then he slipped through the crowd and was gone.

Mrs. Gannelain, blinking, reached out a hand towards Court. 'Got a handkerchief?'

She dabbed at her face then opened her handbag and carefully repaired her make-up. People around them eyed her with curiosity while, for my own part, I began by giving three rousing mental cheers for good old Les; but it was as I watched Esther Gannelain staring attentively into her mirror and patting with a powder puff at her momentarily expressionless face that I had my first premonition that I liked her.

'Has he gone?' she asked. 'Oh, well, let's have that drink.'

They had it and several more, so that she was quite cheered up by the time they left. This was around midnight and by an hour later the whole bar was clear, nobody, apparently, feeling inclined to make a night of it. We turned off most of the lights and cleaned up the shambles of sticky glasses, red-smearred cigarette butts and mountains of ash. Toni checked

the cash then, significantly, shepherded us out ahead of him. I went up to the room I shared with another barman above the kitchen, tossing my white jacket on to a chair, sat on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. Harry, my room-mate, came in behind me sighing a conventional rude word of relief, pulled off his jacket and shoes then flopped down on his bed with a racing paper and a Woodbine. He had large holes in each of his socks and I knew he would eventually fall asleep fully clothed as he was. I would have trusted him as I would trust an impatient tarantula. The room contained two beds, two bedside cupboards, two chairs, one of which had a broken back, and a wardrobe. Its walls were done in flat yellow distemper and smothered with pin-ups on Harry's side. An unshaded bulb cast a sickly light. I sat and looked at it for a while then got up and pulled on my own jacket. Harry cocked an eye at me.

'Going out?'

'Just a stroll.'

He grunted, 'You'll be locked out,' and returned to his paper.

I went down the stairs slowly. I needed a drink but didn't want one and tried to persuade myself I was glad that Toni would have made certain all the liquor was safely under lock and key. The worst moments of my life—almost—were the ones when I had emptied the first glass and was pouring myself the second; when I felt myself sinking, letting myself sink, and knew that in a little space from then I should be enjoying it. I should be spared the feeling tonight, I told myself. But I had to keep on the move.

I reached the rear door, opened it and set off to prowl among the chestnuts towards the gate. I hated the liquor bottles on their shelves and their vile comfort, like a whore's groping hand. A pity I couldn't do without them any longer. Somewhere in the trees ahead of me, not far off the drive, I

heard what sounded like a woman's gasp and a moment later I saw the outline of a car. My first thought was to curse and alter course so as not to disturb some indignant couple; then it registered in my brain that the car was the big Italian model in which Esther Gannelain had arrived and at the same time I heard her voice groaning despairingly, 'Oh, God damn you.'

Amongst the partisans in Yugoslavia I had learned to walk easily in absolute silence; so now, impelled by something more than curiosity, I moved in. On the side from which I approached I could see nothing. The hood was still down on the car but there was nobody in it. I circled carefully until I had a view of the other side, then propped one shoulder against a tree trunk so that I could watch the interesting scene now in progress. Esther Gannelain was kneeling beside the running board ineffectually pulling and tugging at a long limp form on the ground in front of her. The car door was open and, presumably, she was trying to get him, or it, inside. While I watched she rose into a stooping position, one foot planted on either side of the body, and with a strenuous heave succeeded in raising the head and shoulders some way off the ground. For a moment she held her own then the body dropped with a thud and she toppled forward on to it. I fished a cigarette from my pocket and stuck it unlighted between my lips, folded my arms and prepared to enjoy the show.

Esther scrambled up, staggered in a little half-circle and returned to the task like a terrier worrying a very large dead branch. This time she seized the feet, apparently with the not very bright idea of dragging them in first. But to get them to the car door she had to swivel her burden round and while she was so occupied she began to sway, missed her footing and sat down hard. She stayed where she was, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, and swore tearfully for a full two minutes.

I took out my matches, struck one and lit my cigarette. Her face turned quickly towards the flame and she muttered something hoarse and incoherent as I strolled forward. It was a clear night and even under the trees there was plenty of light so that once I was standing over them I had not too much difficulty in recognizing Court as Mrs. Gannelain's unconscious partner. What difficulty I had arose from the fact that someone or something appeared to have beaten his face in. Spidery lines of blood fanned out from around his eyes, the eyes themselves were hidden by dark swellings, his long nose was bent and the lower part of his face a mask of blood. Mrs. Gannelain, after gaping at me for a while in unsteady silence, muttered, "What you wan'? Go 'way."

"What happened to him?" I asked. "Did you run him over?"

"Yeah—yes, that's right," she responded at once; then blinked, shook her head impatiently and corrected herself. "No, no; course not. He fell down. Fell down."

I grinned, sat on the mudguard and drew on my cigarette. This annoyed her.

"What the hell you think you doing? Here, gimme a hand."

"Where's your friend Les? Couldn't he help?"

At once she burst into tears, sagging forward and brushing impatiently with one hand and forearm at her eyes. I watched her for a while then stood up.

"You could get a room for him here. Or would you rather an ambulance?"

"Don't be a damn fool." She stood up and seemed to be a little more sober. "Think I want the whole world to know about it? Got to take him home."

After a moment's thought I said, "O.K.," and flung open the rear door—she had been trying to drag him into the front seat—put an arm under the sleeper and with an effort, for he was no lightweight, hoisted him into the car. Esther Gannelain watched in silence then heaved a long sigh and

whispered, 'Thank you.' She was moving to get into the driving seat when I stopped her with a hand on her elbow.

'Other side, honey. I'll steer.'

She stared at me blankly and I added, 'You don't want to pile yourself into a tree and get a face like his.'

She obeyed with an indifferent shrug and I opened the opposite door for her. As I slid behind the wheel I asked, 'What became of the dog?'

Esther looked around vaguely and murmured, 'He must have gone with He—he went off.'

I shrugged in my turn, started the engine and rolled gently on to the drive and out of the gate.

'Where to?'

She gave me an address off Knightsbridge then closed her eyes and leaned back. I put my foot down and watched the cats' eyes springing at us while one half of my mind pondered and the other half gave itself up to the sensation of driving a really powerful car once more. But this brought back the old bitterness and the pondering half of my mind reflected with a certain malignancy on the sleeping woman beside me.

We covered the journey in twenty-five minutes, which was really going, and drew up before a discreetly wealthy terrace of plain-fronted houses. I shook my fair companion awake.

'Rouse yourself, my beauty. We're here.'

She moaned, blinked in bewilderment, then came to and sat up. I got out on to the pavement and helped her out, telling her as I did so, 'Open the door and I'll carry him up.' Then I pulled Court up from the seat and allowed him to fall forward out of the car over my shoulder. I carried him in a fireman's lift up the steps to where Esther, after some fumbling, had finally succeeded in getting the door open and once she had switched on some lights marched after her upstairs to the first floor. She turned on more lights and I found my-

self in a wide, studio-like room in which a grand piano, some couches and tables and two standard lamps dotted a great expanse of carpet. The walls were lined with low bookshelves.

'Bedroom,' I panted. Court's weight was beginning to press heavily on my neck. She showed me another room where I was able to desposit my passenger, none too gently, on top of a bed that could have accommodated ten in comfort. When I returned to the big lounge she was sprawled on one of the couches with her head pillowed on a cushion. The bathroom adjoined the bedroom, with another bedroom on the far side. I rummaged in the medicine cupboard and pulled out a miscellany of first-aid props, iodine, antiseptic pencils, lint, vaseline, sticking-plaster. In lieu of a basin I tossed the roses out of a broad flower bowl I found in the lounge and filled that with warm water, then spent the next quarter of an hour working on what was left of Court's face. It was the most thorough bit of battery I had seen for a long time but I managed to leave him looking rather more presentable than he had done when I started. Now there was only the Gannelain to take care of.

I went back into the lounge. With her eyes closed she looked younger, her face relaxed and more gentle than it had been. A glance into the other bedroom showed me that the bed was ready made up, so I gathered up Mrs. Gannelain in my arms and carried her in there. A lot of people seemed to need carrying this evening.

I tossed her without much ceremony on to the bed and, preparatory to tucking her under the sheet, took off her shoes and the pink jacket and skirt. Then, stopped in my tracks, as it were, I stood looking down at her shoulders and bosom and the lines of her body gleaming through the black slip. I had thought I had stopped caring about women just as I had stopped caring about pretty well everything else; but

Esther Gannelain was beautiful and she had given me a fair working over in the Delville Country Club. Remembering Pancho and the table leg I grinned down harshly at her black lashes.

'The case is altered, Mrs. Gannelain.'

I seized her arm and shook her roughly. She murmured protestingly and turned her head away but I caught her by the hair and pressed her mouth against mine, clutching her tightly. My heart began to pound, constricted inside my chest, and I saw her eyes half-open.

Luckily it only lasted for a few moments. She was limp, a dead weight in my arms, knocked silly by the liquor she had sunk, and I quickly came to my senses. I let her drop back and stood up once more, not caring very much for either of us. Almost savagely I dragged the bedclothes from underneath her and covered her with them then turned out the light, sourly recalling the old joke about the soldier who saved a woman from rape by changing his mind.

2

IT WAS raining outside when it began to get light and through the window I could see a grey-blue roof glistening wetly against the dim sky. Rolling off the couch where I had been sprawled for the last few hours I went into the bathroom where I borrowed Court's shaving kit to clean myself up. Then I went and had a look at him. He was still lying on his back and looked as lousy as I felt. I went back into the lounge and pottered about for a while, looking things over. Examination of the furniture and some of the pictures told me that a lot of money had gone into that flat. There was an Utrillo and a Picasso in the lounge and a Goya in Court's bedroom, and although I wasn't an expert I had the feeling they were genuine. I wondered when Mrs. Gannelain would wake up.

It was a service flat and I could find nothing to eat but there was an excellently stocked liquor cabinet before which I sat and stared thoughtfully for a long time. There was probably no point in hanging about there; better to save time by clearing out right away. But I had come a good many miles from home for their convenience and it would take me a long time to get back under my own steam. The least they could do would be to drive me back. Moodily I reached forward for the Scotch bottle and poured myself a stiff one.

While I was twisting the glass between my fingers, screwing myself up to the point where I would drink it and the hell with it, there was a complaining moan from Court's bedroom. I went back in and found him still sprawled there but this

time cautiously exploring the wreckage of his head with his fingertips. After a while he peered vaguely around him then wriggled himself halfway over the edge of the bed, propping himself there with one hand on the floor. Here he stayed for a minute or so, breathing heavily.

'Anyone home?' he inquired at last. I leaned against the doorjamb and said nothing. He called more loudly: 'Esther!' Then, when there was no reply, he began to move again, dragging himself off the bed into a sitting position on the floor. From here, slowly, painfully and unsteadily, he got to his feet.

'Esther,' he called again. Then he groped his way over to the dressing-table, leaned on it and stared blearily into the mirror, pushing his swollen nose within inches of it. For a while there was silence.

'My God,' he remarked at last in tones of quiet despair. 'The Bomb has gone off.'

Over his shoulder I could see the blank, raw face with the blackened slits for eyes. They were turned in my direction, and abruptly Court became quite still.

'Do you have a spare head on you?' he asked finally. 'Or have you called about the strontium ninety in the kitchen?'

I took the first pull at my Scotch. 'You need an X-ray,' I told him, 'in case anything is broken. If the bones are O.K. you'd best stick to bed and cold compresses. Quite frankly, you're going to feel like hell for about a week, and look like hell for twice that long.'

He turned himself around carefully and began shuffling towards a padded leather armchair. As he lowered himself into it he asked, 'Am I to take it you are a medical man?'

'No. I'm just the bod who drove you home.'

The damage to his face made an effective mask as he studied me. He did this for some time. 'That was a very amiable gesture,' he said at last, and sank into meditation for

a space. 'My teeth are still all there. I just counted them. Is that my Scotch you're drinking?'

'Afraid so.'

'You're welcome. But for Christ's sake go and get me one.'

'Soda?'

'Yes, lots of soda. And lots of Scotch to go with it.'

There was still no sign of Mrs. Gannelain as I returned to the lounge. Court hadn't moved when I went back and handed him his drink. He took one swallow and said, 'There's too much soda in this.'

'Hard drinking', I answered, 'is not the best plan for a man whose head has recently been used as a punch-ball.'

He thrust the glass back at me and hissed passionately, 'It's my head, and it's my Scotch. Bloody well go and turn that into a drink.'

I stared at him for a few moments then laughed. He reminded me of the time when I was a tough soak as well. So I brought the bottle out of the cabinet and presented it to him. 'Here, help yourself. I should worry.'

He did as I bade him then passed the bottle back to me. 'Come on, drink up. Let's have a party.'

This was a game chicken, that had to be granted. So I shrugged, downed the rest of my drink and poured another. I began to feel better. Court slammed down his glass with a gasp of pain and pressed his forearm over his smashed lips into which the Scotch was burning.

'Ooh,' he whispered after a while. 'The young *bastard*.'

'He made quite a job of you,' I remarked, seating myself on the bed. 'Something must have annoyed him. Or is Les the sadistic type?'

'Mind your own business.' He stared in exasperation at the Scotch. 'I shall have to drink the damn stuff through a straw or something. Why exactly did you drive me home?'

'Your companion wasn't up to it.'

His head came up abruptly. 'Of course,' he whispered. 'You wouldn't have known where to come. Esther—is she here?'

'Next door. Sleeping it off.' I heard my voice turn gruff.

I shouldn't have thought his face could have shown any expression in its present state, but it did: an intense, momentary pleasure. And, I thought, a somewhat vindictive pleasure.

'Well, then,' he said, 'we must see about this X-ray, mustn't we? Are you something of an expert on assault and battery? You talk like one.'

'I've seen a bit in my time.'

While he sat digesting this the door buzzer went outside, two sharp, imperious bursts. Court didn't move.

'Be a good fellow,' he said at length. 'See who it is. Tell them I've gone to Majorca.'

I went to the front door and opened it. A man standing at an impatient attention outside gave me a swift, keen inspection from head to foot and commanded, 'Tell Mr. Polaris that General Fletcher is here.'

He looked like a general, too: a rigidly straight frame, slightly taller than me, iron-grey hair and moustache, square jaw and tanned, youthful features, pin-point pupils in blue eyes which aimed at me a confidently domineering scrutiny. I stood for a while considering what he had just said; there was a lot to consider. Then I scratched my chin and told him, 'Mr. Polaris has gone to Majorca.'

His head jerked up as though a private soldier had said a rude word to him during a ceremonial parade and he marched straight past me into the flat. Had I not stood aside he would have gone through me. In the middle of the room he halted and swung round.

'I never forget a face. I know you. Morris. Isn't that right? You were in Africa.'

'Once upon a time,' I agreed. I picked up my glass from

where I had set it down to answer the door and took a hard swallow. General Fletcher stood looking at me with, for some reason, a pleased expression.

'Well,' he said, 'that's jolly good. I'm glad to find you here. Now, what's this nonsense about Polaris? Where is he and what's he up to this time?'

I indicated the bedroom with a movement of my head. 'In there. And he's not up to much.'

He turned promptly on his heel and marched out after Court. I heard him exclaim 'Good God!' as he caught sight of the mangled face of the sufferer, then the door was pushed to. I was left wondering what exactly was so gratifying about my presence there to General Fletcher. Personally, I barely recalled having come up against him but, of course, I knew about him. He had made a name for himself, both during the war and in the various bust-ups which had helped prevent us becoming bored with the Brave New World which followed, as a dashing commander in the field; the papers liked to refer to him as the Jumping General on account of his exploits with airborne troops. It was since his early retirement from the Army, however, that he had really started to hit the headlines. 'Stirring it', he had announced, was to be his hobby from now on and he frequently sported a large wooden spoon in public in token of this aim. Now, seldom a week went by in which General Fletcher was not to be observed 'making it hot for the bureaucrats', 'gingering up the old fogies', 'hitting out at hooliganism', or engaged in some such laudable pursuit. Wooden Spoon Clubs to organize and finance the citizenry in mass persecution of officialdom were his latest idea. And the flat's battered tenant was Courtney Polaris. I was in exalted company.

Esther came out of her room. She was wearing a quilted wrap and had swept her hair up on top of her head. She had put on some lipstick but no other make-up, which showed me

how good her pale skin really was, and her stony face showed no trace of a hangover. She leaned against the doorpost with a cigarette burning in one hand; how much she remembered of the previous evening I couldn't tell except that she eyed me without friendliness.

'Who was that?' she asked.

'General Fletcher. He's in there now, sympathizing with Mr. Polaris.'

She didn't seem over-thrilled at the news. 'You should have told me who your pal was,' I went on, 'I didn't realize we had such a valuable passenger last night.'

She gave a sour little grin and moved farther into the lounge. 'You've heard of him?'

'Just about. Courtney Polaris: financial wizard, lord of the take-over bid, eminence not so bloody *grise* of the international money-market. If you don't read the City pages you come across him in the gossip columns.'

She didn't reply but instead peered about inside the liquor cabinet. After a while, I told her, 'It's in the bedroom.'

That didn't make her any chummier, either, but thirst overcame her pride and she stalked out after the Scotch bottle. She didn't re-emerge when Polaris, accompanied by the General, came out. He was wearing now a hacking-style tweed suit with a scarlet muffler at his throat and I couldn't help noticing that his feet were encased in suède chukka boots of a purplish hue; but, if you were Courtney Polaris, you could get away with that sort of thing. I observed the General giving me another of his keen, 'Are the men in good heart?' examinations, so slouched across to a cigarette box I had observed, took one and lit it.

'So glad you're still here,' said Polaris. He sounded more surprised than glad. 'I've rung down for some breakfast. I actually managed to shave.'

It hadn't done much that I could see to improve his

appearance. General Fletcher perched himself on a table, swung his long legs and continued to look at me. 'It seems I was under a misapprehension, Morris, when I spoke to you just now. I thought Mr. Polaris had been lucky and sensible enough to secure your services in some kind of position. That isn't so?'

'No,' I said, 'it's not.'

He nodded to himself, screwing up his lips. 'Tell me: what exactly *are* you doing at present?'

'Didn't Mr. Polaris tell you?' I asked. 'Or perhaps he can't remember that far back. I serve drinks in a bar.'

Court sniggered, slipped into a woman's TV programme voice and enquired throatily, 'And tell me: do you find the work *interesting*?'

The door buzzer went and a couple of waiters came in with a breakfast trolley. They left it there at a sign from Court and withdrew. Court approached the trolley gingerly. 'Let's see if I can eat. I may have to die of thirst but there's no sense in going hungry as well.' General Fletcher kept his eye fixed sternly upon me; I reproached myself silently: 'There you go: boasting again.'

'Bars can be damn good places,' said the General, 'but not to *work* in.'

I moved over beside Court and helped myself to some coffee and a kidney. 'Nearly all of us', I remarked with my mouth full, 'have to work. It's a law of economics.'

'By God, it's agony,' mumbled Court. 'Why do they make boiled eggs so tough these days?'

The General slid off the table and began to prowl about. 'We have to work, yes. But we're left an element of choice as to what we work at. That is, so far, until our masters in the Ministries get properly organized.'

I simply went on eating. The General put his head on one side and said, 'I'm glad I ran across you.'

'Sure,' I commented, taking a swig at my coffee. 'Me too. It's always nice to see old faces. Pass the rolls, Polaris, old chap.'

'Morris,' said General Fletcher with steely patience, 'I am not being sentimental. I don't believe in seeing a damn good man like you on the bum—which is what you are at present. You and I must have a little business discussion.'

I leered at him. 'Thank you, General Fletcher, sir; but I don't play the stock markets. It's against my principles.'

His face darkened. While I enjoyed myself watching him not liking it, Esther came back into the room. She had put on a black, figure-hugging dress with some jewellery, very high heels and plenty of make-up. I wondered for whose benefit the display was. The cold look she gave me made me certain she remembered our little wrestle of the night before, however vaguely, and I switched to wondering whether she was annoyed about the pass I had made or because I hadn't followed it up. 'That's the way,' she told me kindly, 'eat up. Court, my poor darling, you ought to have beefsteak on that poor, poor face. Or have you got beefsteak on it already?'

For answer, Court unchivalrously summed up my own impression by remarking, 'You look a bit tartish for this hour of the morning.'

'But, darling, we have a *visitor*. The barman from the Delville. You wouldn't want me to appear dressed as though he were just *anybody*. It might seem rude.'

General Fletcher gave her a hard look and spoke in an equally hard voice. 'I happen to know the barman from the Delville, and something about him. He's not just anybody, far from it.'

'Well, that's just what I said,' muttered Esther, more frozen than ever. I simpered, 'Ooh, General! You'll make me blush.'

I could see that Court was watching me covertly but he

didn't put any questions. Instead, he remarked, 'Mr. Morris says I need an X-ray. Will you drive the ambulance, Esther?'

'I suppose so. When are we going?'

'No time like the present. I might be in urgent need of medical attention.'

'All right. Let's go, then. I'll get my coat.'

She went out once more and Court turned his swollen visage towards us. 'Possibly I shall have to lie up for a while with this, General, but I'm sure you'll keep things moving nicely.'

'That's the way, old boy, you rely on me,' said the General harshly, 'we've bags of time to spare. I suggest that, just for the immediate future, you try to avoid getting involved in bar-room brawls, however much you may enjoy them—and', he added unkindly 'however good you may be at them.'

'Basil, that's unkind,' protested Court ruefully. Esther returned wrapped in a fur coat and asked, 'Are you ready?'

'Perfectly, my dear.' He saluted me with benevolent nod. 'Good-bye, Morris, it was really very decent of you to take all this trouble. Perhaps we shall be seeing you again.'

Esther didn't glance at me. They went out of the door, leaving me, after driving them thirty-odd miles from my home base and snatching some sleep on a couch for their benefit, apart from carrying them around all over the place, to work out how I was going to get back and what was going to happen when I did. I was already late for work. I laughed. They were the sort of people I liked to meet.

'Why do you laugh?' asked the General. I explained and he scowled. 'Between you and me, Morris, they're a couple of skunks. Pretty odd skunks as well. Ditching you here is the type of joke they appreciate. However, for the time being I need Polaris. So let us revenge ourselves by drinking a lot of his excellent whisky.'

'That would be fine,' I said. 'But you forget I have a job to get back to.'

He looked at me in surprise. 'The bar? You're not bothering about that place any more, surely?' He moved to an armchair, settled himself in it with one knee curled up somewhere near his chin and looked up at me with crinkles of seriousness at the corners of his eyes. 'I wasn't being perfunctory in saying what I did about a business discussion and I won't be put off, however churlish you prefer to make yourself. I need men like you, Morris, as many as I can get. You have a damn good war record and that's more important to me than the fact that you're down on your luck at present.'

'Why?' I asked. 'Are you going to start a war, or something?'

He smiled. 'Not exactly. If you read the papers you're probably aware that I've become a fairly prominent political figure since leaving the service. I'm not doing it as a career; I'm doing it because I think it my duty. The condition of the country worries me. Don't laugh, I know it sounds trite as well as you do. But, trite or not, the fact remains that we're in a bad way. Take the swelling Civil Service, for example, not to mention local government. Do you know what led to the fall of the Roman Empire?' His eyes burned up at me urgently as he put the question in goose-pimply tones. 'The growth of a vast, suffocating bureaucracy financed by crippling taxation under Diocletian and his successors. Precisely the same sort of thing we have developing today.'

'Go on,' I whispered. 'My hair's standing on end.'

'It's already led to a cracking of morale—you know the cant phrase, *I'm all right, Jack*; people think, "It's a big firm; what I do doesn't matter, and if I can swindle them out of a little something they won't notice the loss." People steal. What else can you expect when our rulers set an example of disregard for citizens' property rights?'

'What else? Especially when you remember people are

crooks anyway. And just what part am I to play in saving the nation?’

‘I’m doing what I can to wake people up to the danger. And what influence I have I use to fight its spread. But there’s not much I can do alone. I need help: the help of straight, plain men with loyalty and guts.’

‘Man,’ I remarked, ‘you really have a problem.’

‘Morris, you don’t fool me with that kind of talk. You’re the type I need. And you’ve made your mark as a fighter.’

‘What has fighting to do with it?’

He glanced away and paused for a moment with pursed lips. ‘Fighting has quite a lot to do with it. Look at the hooliganism and the plain murder rife today. Nineteen sixty, a thousand years of settled government in this country, and women can’t walk the streets alone. You know as well as I do, Morris, there’s only one real way to handle louts, the swarms of them we have with us today like that rabble in Notting Hill.’

‘Sure,’ I commented. ‘Kick ’em in the head.’

‘Exactly!’ he cried with hearty approval. ‘And by God, we’re the people to do it. The police can’t; their hands are tied by the do-gooders and the guilt-ridden intellectuals who are secretly fascinated by the vicious young thug, who enjoy vicarious suffering. But I’m getting together a crowd of chaps who’ll have no qualms about settling the hash of those gentlemen quickly and unpleasantly.’

‘Which gentlemen?’ I asked.

‘Eh?’

‘Which gentlemen? The do-gooders or the yobs?’

‘Why, the yobs, of course.’ He stared at me, then grinned. ‘Of course, something of the same sort might help straighten out our pacifist friends as well.’

‘It might indeed.’ I was getting bored, and impatient.

‘Well, General, it’s been an interesting social discussion. Now I must be getting back to work.’

He gave me a stern, ‘The honour of the regiment, my boy’, look and I pinched another cigarette from the box. ‘You prefer not to be interested?’

‘Just that. I don’t see myself as a vigilante. Not nowadays. I just want to get back to polishing the glasses.’

He stood up, good-humoured once more. ‘I’m baffled, Morris, I confess. Plenty of men go down, but there’s something wrong with the man who prefers to stay down. I shouldn’t have thought you were one of that type.’

I stared coldly and blew smoke at him. ‘And just how the hell would you know?’

He met my stare without flinching. ‘I daresay you have your reasons,’ he said finally, quite gently. ‘Where is this job of yours?’

‘Near Leatherhead.’

He pulled a face. ‘And that precious pair left you to get back on your own. Well, we may disagree, Morris, and perhaps my efforts at moral re-armament irritate you. But you won’t object if I drive you back?’

‘Why should I object? I need the lift.’

3

WE DIDN'T talk much on the way down. When we were getting close, however, the General remarked with a shade of diffidence, 'It was fairly early on in the war when I met you, Morris. I heard something about you later. But did something go wrong?'

'How do you mean?'

He shrugged. 'Oh, I don't know. I just had an impression. . . . It might account for your odd attitude.'

Slumped in my seat I said surlily, 'Never mind my attitude.'

'All right, Morris, all right. But I'm going to leave my card with you. If you change your mind and want to get in touch with me you'll know where to find me.'

I took the small pasteboard carelessly and shoved it in my pocket. The car pulled up outside the gates and, looking up the drive, I couldn't repress a sinking feeling like the one I got in my early days at school at the start of a new term. But I climbed out all the same, said curtly, 'Thanks for the lift', and started in. Presently I heard the car drive away behind me.

General Fletcher, I decided, was not an utterly repulsive character, and only slightly out of his mind. But my present condition and the reasons for it were something I didn't explain to people, not even when I was on a jag.

There were people moving about in the bar but I went straight on past and up to my room. I turned the handle very quietly and pushed the door open; there was never any telling who might be inside.

Nobody was giving my things the once-over, not that I imagined that hadn't been done several times already. They were welcome; there was only one thing I bothered about and that was hidden. I went across to the wardrobe, pulled it out and slid my hand behind it. It was still there, fastened to the plywood by a piece of sticking-plaster at one edge. I pulled it away, drew it out and looked at it.

Once more she smiled up at me, shy, pleased, with the same wonder and delight in her eyes. Every time I looked at it her face seemed younger above the open tunic with her curly golden hair cut short around it. It had been a good camera and the photo was a speaking likeness, so much so that when I looked at it I soon stopped seeing a photograph and she seemed to be there with me again; or, rather, I was back with her, with the sun pouring through my shirt and my heart up in my throat, the two of us alone on the rocky hillside. It had been a mistake to look at it. I leaned my forearm against the wardrobe and pressed my eyes into it, hard. Toni couldn't have picked a worse moment to come in.

I only gradually became aware that he was there, leaning against the doorpost and studying me with curiosity and enjoyment. I straightened up slowly, pushing Anna's picture into the inside pocket of my coat.

'You're not sick, by any chance, are you, Morris?' Toni inquired with solicitude. 'Not beaten down with overwork, or anything?' He shuffled forward carefully. 'We've all missed you downstairs this morning, Clem, old boy. Getting quite worried about you. What was the trouble?' He came closer.

'You're very quiet, Morris. What is it? Hangover?' His tone became more vitriolic as he worked himself up prior to starting the rough-house routine. 'Know what I think? I think you've come to the wrong place, Morris. You've got the address wrong. This isn't a home for dead-beat alcoholics,

Morris; we're not a charity. People either come here to work, Morris, or they're *customers*, who pay money for our services. But as for picking up drunks off the street and sluicing them down after a night on the bend and then giving them free drinks and some beer money, we just don't do it, Morris.'

I heard all this without really taking it in. Part of me was still away on the sun-scorched hillside so that I simply looked at him emptily. This annoyed Toni, who had now crept within comfortable punching distance. 'Are you listening, Morris? We don't *do* it.'

He hit me in the stomach to emphasize his point, and, as always, he was a good puncher. I came back to the shabby little room with the pin-ups on the wall and Toni's gloating face within inches of mine, gasped for breath and butted him hard on the bridge of the nose.

The bone cracked and blood gushed from his nostrils; he yelled but was still game enough to keep trying and brought his knee up. I was still on my way down into a crouch, however. I blocked him with my forearm and slashed upward with my thumb clamped between the fore and middle fingers. I suppose it was just as well I didn't take his eye out but I got the nose again instead, ripping a nostril open. His cry this time was almost a scream and he lurched away. I straightened up, took hold of his wrist and threw him the length of the room. As that wasn't very far he hit the wall and bounced off to the floor and instinctively I went after him, drawing my foot back to finish him. But before I could kick I saw his blood-stained face, the eyes open and looking up at me. He wore an expression I had seen before: once on the face of a German S.S. man just before I stabbed him; once on two comrades of mine before they were put in front of a Communist firing squad. It was the face of helpless humanity, reminding the killer that he is doomed as surely as his victim.

So I stepped back, rubbing my hands against my hips, made one prowling circuit of the room, then opened the door. Toni, when I glanced back, had rolled over to face the wall.

‘Cheerio, Toni,’ I said.

I had left him in something of a mess, but I didn’t expect any blowbacks. Toni was a cheap crook who would hardly go running to the law with his broken face. It would make Don’s day when he saw him next, especially if he knew I had done it. I could have called in for a last word with him, but a bout of adolescent hero-worship was not exactly suited to my mood at the moment and I already felt I had made a lot of unnecessary fuss over Toni. So I slipped out of the back door at the foot of the stairs and walked round through the trees to the drive.

My pot-polishing days, it seemed, had come to an abrupt end. Now I would have to find something else and, in spite of what I had said earlier, the easiest thing to do, now that the situation had changed, seemed indicated by the General’s card in my pocket. I could still, I fancied, hold down a job protecting the nation from the terrors of the coffee bars, providing I wasn’t expected to display moral fervour in doing so. I lit a cigarette and made for the station.

4

THIS TIME I drove the big Fiat with General Fletcher beside me, the canopy up because the weather was still grey and damp. Court and Esther sat in the back while I aimed the radiator along the white line and floated us around the bends, cruising comfortably in the fifties and sixties. We had eaten a very good lunch in a large but old and pleasant inn, since when the car and I had been consolidating the friendship we had begun to form that first night I drove it from the Delville. Now the long English hills, surmounted by their austere copses carved and polished by the wind slid past against the English Gothic sky. Past Sherborne, we were nearly there.

‘Next turning on the left,’ said the General.

‘It’s a tricky road,’ remarked Court from the back. ‘Can you bear to slow down?’

After a week in the nursing home he had got his face back although it was still puffy and shaded with green and yellow. The General and I had collected him this morning and then picked up Esther from a private hotel in Kensington. From the way they greeted each other I had discovered that she had not visited him once.

I pondered the impression I had that with Court’s recovery the General had taken on a more businesslike air than he had worn previously. I certainly didn’t feel we had done much towards saving the nation during the past week. My time had been largely spent in a West End office dealing

with correspondence about the Wooden Spoon Clubs and I had already formed the impression that there were some pretty odd types involved in them. Once I had accompanied my new chief to a meeting where the audience had consisted largely of peppery, rather mad old codgers of the 'Bring Back The Birch' school. Apart from that I had acquired a new and well-tailored wardrobe and the knowledge that General Fletcher certainly wasn't hard-pressed for cash.

We swung into a road that was not much more than a lane, twisting and turning between high banks so that eventually I was forced to swallow my pride and change down. We were heading for what Polaris called his 'little country seat', more, I judged, on business than for Court to convalesce. Turning a sharp bend, I found the road filled by a Land Rover which pulled up a few feet from our bumper. From it climbed a very big man in tweeds and gum-boots who stood up on the running board looking at us.

'What does he want to do?' I asked letting the engine idle. 'Fight a duel about it?'

'It's George,' cried Esther, who had drunk her share of the lunch-time wines and liqueurs. 'Let me wave to George.'

She wound the window down and shoved her head out. 'George! Hullo, George. We're back.'

The big man raised a stolid hand and clambered back into the driving seat. He had a red farmer's face with thin gold hair on top of a round head. The Land Rover went into a speedy reverse out of sight again the way it had come and I enquired casually, 'Who is George? One of the tenantry?'

Polaris laughed thinly. 'Not exactly. One of the retainers. Watch out for him, Morris, he's an ex-policeman. He does look a shade bucolic, I grant you that.'

Esther, too, laughed. I had been caught out. She had made no comment on my reappearance in the General's train and had largely ignored me. I didn't let it bother me

too much. 'Want to stop?' I asked but Court said, 'No, no. We'll be seeing him later.'

Quite suddenly the house came into view. I knew that Polaris was a financial tycoon of fabulous wealth and was getting to know a little of his mentality, but even so I was a little taken aback at what I saw: the cold sumptuousness of an eighteenth-century nobleman's palace, pillared and pedimented, the sort of place where you would only expect to find selection boards or week-end courses in folk dancing for working-class men and women. It lay on top of a rise to our left with a road, much better than the public one we were on at the moment, winding up towards it through parkland in which a few oaks still stood. One or two of the tall windows showed lights and behind woods rose up a hillside to form a dark background. We drove alongside a high wall of red brick until we reached a pair of pillars with wrought iron gates standing open. Swinging the car through them I put my foot down and we roared up the drive.

'You may not think much of it,' said Court lugubriously. 'But it's home to me.'

There was a semi-circular gravel car park at the bottom of the stone steps of the house. I raced the Fiat into it and skidded to a halt with the front bumper a foot from the steps. We climbed out into the gathering dusk as the massive door of the house swung open to send light tumbling down the steps into a shallow pool around us. I moved around the bonnet back into shadow so that I could study the men coming down with the lamplight towards us. One of them was a short, bustling man with rimless spectacles and a small moustache dressed in a smart but sober pin-stripe suit. He made for Polaris. The two others were wearing leather jackets. The one I marked was the leader; he was a great big man with close-cropped fair hair, about thirty-five, I judged, and wore, not only a black polo-necked sweater under the

leather jacket, but jack-boots. I studied him thoughtfully as he went up to the General and said, 'Good evening, sir,' with a relaxed heartiness. These must be a couple of General Fletcher's straight, plain men. I fancied I was beginning to catch on to the manner in which my new employer aimed to save the country.

'Hullo, Charles,' said the General. 'Nice to see you again. Let me present the latest addition to our numbers: Captain Clement Morris, late Berkshire Hussars. Clement, this is Charles Fairbrass.'

His head swung round towards me quite slowly but he was alert enough, all right. 'How do you do, Captain? A pleasure to meet you.' He extended a courteous hand and smiled. A very gentlemanly smile.

'Just call me Clem,' I said, 'I'm a civilian now.'

He nodded, eyes on me and gestured towards his companion. 'This is Stefan. His second name is frightfully Polish and unpronounceable. Stefan, Clement Morris.'

Stefan, a smaller man with cold blue eyes gave me a little bow. Beyond them I saw Esther walking slowly up the steps. From the way she held her head I guessed she had been listening to the introductions with a concealed interest. Polaris and the bespectacled man were talking together as they moved after her; the General was still amongst our group. Framed, almost silhouetted, in the lighted doorway with the huge façade of the house spread in front of her, she suddenly looked to me very much alone; and I had a brief, ridiculous feeling that I should have liked to overtake her and walk with her into the museum-like building.

'Charles,' said General Fletcher, 'I'm going to leave you to take care of Clement. You have a room for him?'

'Yes, sir, have no fear, we'll soon make him comfortable. Let's toss the luggage inside, eh? Then I suggest a drink before dinner.'

He walked round to the boot, opened it and swung out the heaviest of the suitcases—and it was heavy—in one hand. ‘Here, Stefan,’ he called, ‘catch.’

The case flew through the air and hit the Pole in the chest. It didn’t quite knock him over but he staggered a couple of yards while the suitcase fell with a thump to the ground. Charles’s roar of gusty, extroverted laughter echoed from the wall of the house. Stefan stood for some moments in a half-crouch, his lips drawn back in a snarl.

‘You great stupid bastard,’ he yelled furiously, ‘Jesu Maria, one of these days I’ll——’

Charles roared again and held up an admonitory finger. ‘Now, Stefan, naughty temper!’ He came towards us carrying the other two cases and gave me a wink. ‘Stefan is a damn good type, really; but a little innocent fooling always makes him blow his sullen Slav top. Come on, Stefan, there’s a good chap: we can’t let Clem lug the baggage around the moment he arrives.’

I had lit a cigarette, leaning against the car bonnet and taking the scene in: the three of us dwarfed in the shadows of the looming house, Stefan’s sudden, brief rage, Charles’s brutal laughter radiating from the walls with a hollow note reminded me of one of those sombre, slightly sinister paintings of the Flemish school of tiny figures overshadowed by a landscape of wooded crags and massive, mysterious temples.

We went up the steps together. Charles remarked, ‘I thought our tame millionaire looked a little the worse for wear. Has he been horsewhipped by angry shareholders?’

I shrugged. ‘I believe the story is that he saved a small child from the path of a runaway milk float.’

Charles laughed tolerantly, full of contemptuous condescension for Mr. Courtney Polaris who had built up and ruled a mighty, unseen empire which could crush men twice as big as Charles without noticing it. I squinted sideways



at him; it all fitted in; I had met Charles's type before.

They gave me a room tucked away in one of the wings: a very pleasant room with a creeper outside the windows in which, I suspected, birds probably kicked up hell in the mornings. When I had cleaned up and changed my shirt Charles escorted me downstairs again to a long room from which tall windows overlooked a walled garden at one side of the house. Two men were playing at a billiard table and a few others were lounging at a bar at one end of the room.

'What can I get you, Clem?' asked Charles, stepping behind the bar.

'Gin and tonic, please.' I answered automatically. The place, in atmosphere, was a precise re-creation of an officers' mess.

'Gentlemen,' said Charles, 'may I introduce Clement Morris who joins us today. Clem, these are, reading from left to right, Andy Phillips, Stuart Brent and Chuck Palmer.'

They greeted me in turn. Chuck Palmer was a burly, beetle-browed fellow in the fashionable leather jacket; Brent looked the conventional bull-necked golf club 'Damn you, sir' boor; Andy Phillips was a lean, lanky man with a pleasant, rather barmy smile and only one arm. He was dressed in cavalry twill trousers, spotless white shirt and bow tie and wore a monocle. Despite the monocle he stood out at once as the only man there who really belonged to the upper crust of which the others, with their punctilious manners, would have liked to claim membership.

'We were just discussing', remarked Brent to me in an accent redolent of Sutton and Cheam, 'the mystery of the Polaris countenance. Was he really run over by a bus, or has somebody squared up to him at last?'

There was no real point in being secretive about it. 'A youngster named Les,' I said. 'A bit of a hot-head.'

'Les!' Brent slammed his hand on the bar. 'Young Moran

gave him his come-uppance? Well, you know'—he glanced round at the others—'I can't say I'm really surprised. He had it in him; and it was on the cards after all.'

Chuck Palmer sniggered. 'All the same, looks as though it was Polaris who got the girl. She's back here with him.' He talked with a London accent. Brent looked at me.

'What's happened to him since?'

I shrugged. 'Search me. He just thumped Polaris and blew.'

'And,' declared Brent staring around him impressively, 'I'm willing to bet we never see him again. He's got the push.'

'Well, I should imagine so,' murmured Palmer. 'One mustn't kick the goose that lays the golden eggs.'

'That's not what I meant. I knew he was going; could have told you he was on the way out.'

Charles rolled a set of poker dice idly across the bar. The foresight of the sagacious Brent didn't appear to impress him all that much.

'It's the usual pattern,' went on the other, lowering his voice intensely, 'I've seen it before. So have the rest of you. He got on too well with the Black Widow. And with her you can go so far and then——' He snapped his fingers dramatically. 'Perhaps you don't remember that Aussie airline pilot who got very thick with her at one time. Everything going swimmingly, our friend up there out in the cold. And then what happened? Drunk in his aircraft; back down under, broken and disgraced.' He jerked his head. 'She disappeared for a spell. I happen to know our friend went off to Vienna and brought her back from there. There was that estate manager he had here. Nice fellow; what was his name? Blackwood. He was another. But he found it wiser to take that job in Canada while the going was good. Remember the going-away party she threw that time?'

The black-browed Palmer laughed again. 'I'll say. Cost over a thousand according to what I heard; and paying for the damage must have run to half that again.'

'And now Les has followed them. The same pattern over again.' He looked around at us portentously. 'There's no getting away from it: if you want to last here, no matter who you may be, it's best to keep your distance from—well, from that female.'

'Polaris is the possessive type, you mean?' I suggested. He jerked his head at me heavily and shuffled about as though he were winding himself up for his next remark. I saw Phillips glance at me and smile gently into his glass.

'I don't mind telling you,' Brent brought out at last, 'I sometimes wonder just who is running this bloody show.' He drank up angrily.

'And who,' I asked, 'is supposed to be running it?'

He looked at me in a startled fashion as though I had announced myself as an admirer of Mao Tse-tung. Charles, still rolling the dice around, said quietly, 'We're all General Fletcher's men here; the same as yourself.'

He seemed to think that a good enough answer. I didn't agree but thought I had better not push it. Andy Phillips yawned, stretched and slapped himself on the chest.

'One for all; and all for one. Ho, hum; will it never be dinner time? Clem, how would you like to look around this palatial barrack? Acting as guide may help to still my tummy rumbles.'

We drank up and went out through the vast entrance hall. Phillips indicated a door and said, 'There's a gallery full of offices through there. That's where we work on occasions.'

'What at?' I asked. He shrugged.

'We most of us have our little hobby horses. I believe you've been doing something in connection with the Wooden Spoon Clubs.'

'Yes; but it's a job I could do without. I have noticed one or two of them doing some good work, I must admit—baffling efforts at compulsory purchase, for example; but there seems to be a fifty per cent membership of head cases.'

He laughed. 'I shouldn't be at all surprised, considering that it was I who started them.'

We were moving towards the rear of the house. I glanced at him sideways. 'You? Nobody gave you much credit for it.'

'Well, naturally not. The whole thing had to appear as the General's scheme. He was very grateful, however; and in fact you must admit they provide a good framework for organization. The good old cell system, really, of course.'

I docketed this remark together with the other pieces of the jigsaw. 'And so well camouflaged,' I hazarded, 'that you can build up your underground right out in the open.'

'That's it.' He gave me his pleasant smile as we emerged on to the terrace. The lights of the house fell on flower beds, thick hedges and rose trees which stretched away from us towards the darkness of the hillside. Here and there I saw the ghostly glimmer of a statue.

'Not a bad prospect, eh?' remarked Phillips. 'This was once a family home. At this point, human achievement in the art of living reached its peak. For the past two hundred years we've been moving away from that silver age. Progressing away from it, of course. Democracy and council flats are much more wholesome. Ah, Clem, shall we ever see the glories of the *settecento* again?'

'I dunno,' I said. 'The plumbing wasn't up to much in any case.' Away at the other end of the terrace I could see a lone figure leaning on the parapet. Phillips followed my glance.

'With due respect to our forthright comrade Brent,' he observed softly, 'I hold her to be an extremely pleasant woman.'

'Maybe you're right,' I grunted. Recalling the bull-necked

man's oration I suddenly felt a flash of devilment. 'If you'll excuse me for the moment, I think I'll exchange a courteous good evening with her.'

I felt his eyes rest on me with amused approval. 'Certainly. You carry on. I'll see you at dinner.'

Esther didn't move her head as I strolled up behind her. She remained staring out over the garden. Down there I heard voices now and, looking in their direction, made out figures pacing slowly about together amongst the flower beds.

'Good evening, Mrs. Gannelain.'

Now she looked round without surprise and gave me a cool scrutiny. 'Hullo. Have you a cigarette about you?'

I gave her one and lit them for both of us. She had changed into a simple black woollen dress that couldn't have cost more than a hundred guineas and had a shawl about her shoulders. I stood with my hands in my pockets studying the garden with her and remarking banally, 'Nice little place you have here.'

'Glad you like it. Court will be pleased.'

'He owns it?'

She gave a sudden, contemptuous grin. 'Who did you imagine owned it? Your heroic chief, General Fletcher?'

'I've given up imagining things,' I told her, 'there's enough fantasy provided here as it is.'

She looked at me more carefully. 'Isn't it what you expected?'

I shrugged. 'Expecting things is something I gave up a long time ago.'

She drew on her cigarette, stood in silence for some moments. The figures in the garden came closer and, although they were speaking in low tones, I recognized Court's voice. 'Who's he got with him?' I asked. 'The General?'

She shook her head with a little bitter smile. 'No. Dis-

tinguished company. A trade union high-up and a couple of shop-stewards.'

'What is it—an industrial relations study group? They ought to let me sit in on that.'

'No. They're organizing a strike.' She spoke with affected casualness, watching for my reaction. Since I didn't feel any she was, presumably, disappointed.

'Why did General Fletcher bring you here?' she asked at length.

'He says he met me before, a long time ago.'

'Where was that?'

'You'd better ask him. I don't remember.'

Esther scraped her foot impatiently along the flag-stones. 'You're fond of your poker face, aren't you, Mr. Morris—or should I say, Captain Morris?'

'Please yourself. But normally I slug people who call me Captain.' The red ends of cigars glowed down in the garden amongst the shadowy group.

'All right, then I won't. And you can be as secretive as you like, if that's your idea of fun. But I'll tell you what I think. Two people made a mistake when you came here. The General made a mistake in bringing you; and you made one in coming. You may be a military type, and you're probably something of a tough as well. But you don't fit in with these people; you're not their sort. I advise you to watch your step, Mr. Morris.' Her voice changed. 'And don't be too self-sufficient. You may need a friend before you're through here.'

I stared back at her. 'Thanks. I'll bear it in mind.'

She turned away, back to the house. 'It's nearly dinner time. See you around.'

She walked away and I noted approvingly that she knew how to walk. As I watched her go Polaris's high-pitched laugh floated up from his huddle with the labour movement.

5

THE BRIEFING—the term was the General's—took place in the library. Outside the morning was grey, so that inside the fire already threw a rosy light on the polished oak tables and the leather backs of the books which lined the walls. We sat incongruously on Regency furniture, bulky men, most of us, many with large, brutal hands, outsprawled legs. The General sat at a large desk in the corner.

'If you read the papers,' he said, 'and I take it most of you do, you'll already be in the picture to a certain extent. The strike at Patchers' Bristol works is now a complete stoppage and it seems from this morning's reports that it may spread to other engineering works in the country. As you may have read, there's now been some trouble between pickets and hauliers trying to enter for loads.' He looked around at us grimly. I lit a cigarette and remarked under my breath, 'This is it, chaps.'

'That's the type of hooliganism we aim to prevent. Those chaps may have a case; that's beside the point. If they imagine they're going to be allowed to rough-house their way to grabbing whatever they feel inclined to demand, then they're in for a damn rude awakening. I'm sure none of us would argue about their right to strike.' There was an ironic snort from Stuart Brent. The General glanced at him sharply and went on. 'The strike is their constitutional right, authorized by due process of law; but nobody gave them the legal power to assault citizens not involved in the dispute

who are going about their legitimate business. For that matter, nobody gave them the right to assault anyone. Now they seem to think they can simply assert that right by force. We're going to teach them their mistake.'

His hearers still lounged impassively while he shuffled some papers about in front of him. 'Now for the details. Men are being brought in for the operation from South Wales, London and the Midlands. Mainly contingents supplied by the Wooden Spoon Clubs but some professional outsiders as well who may be useful. I need hardly say that the affair is, officially, strictly unconnected with the Wooden Spoon Clubs; we're calling the front organization, if one should be necessary, the Action For Liberty group. You gentlemen will supply direction and stiffening. Movement as follows: Group A, led by Chuck Palmer, will proceed immediately to Bristol to make contacts and take up positions. Group B under Charles Fairbrass, will leave at midnight tonight to rendezvous with lorries carrying the London forces and arrive in Bristol at dawn. Operations are scheduled to begin at the Works at eight hundred hours. At that time, two lorries will arrive at the Works' gates for loads; our advance parties will be close at hand at precisely that time. Should anything other than a completely peaceful demonstration be made against the lorries—*any* attempt at obstruction, in other words—then you let them have it. I count on you to see that the actual suppression is done not only as effectively but as rapidly as possible before police intervention can make itself felt. While we are on the subject of police, should any-one be arrested he will name Mr. Ben Caffney of Stoll Chambers, Bristol, as his solicitor. Mr. Caffney will take care of that angle; but, of course, don't get arrested if you can avoid it. Now, I shall read the names of the two parties and give map references for the rendezvous. Before I do so, are there any questions?'

'Suppose they turn windy?' demanded Brent harshly, 'won't start anything. What do we do then?'

The General gave him a wise smile. 'I think you can take it, Stuart, that something will start. Your problem won't arise.'

Brent and one or two others laughed. No one else had anything to ask so General Fletcher read out the names of the two groups. I was in Group B, to leave at midnight; when he reached my name the General glanced at me and said, 'If you don't mind, Clem, I should like a word with you when we break up.' He finished his reading and stood up. 'That's all, gentlemen, unless anyone has anything to add. This is our first real show and I know you've been looking forward to it. Good luck; and let's make it a good one.'

They came up off their chairs and made for the door in twos and threes, heading for the bar: thick necks and big shoulders in leather jackets, cold, competent grey eyes with pin-point pupils, a heavy fist dangling carelessly beside a massive, animal haunch. I perched on a corner of the General's desk and watched them go. He turned to me with a smile but his Selection Board scrutiny above it. 'Well, Clem? Do you fancy this trip?'

I puffed smoke. 'Why not? It's all in the line of duty, eh?'

'That's beside the point. The question is, is this your type of duty? This morning's conference should have given you a pretty clear idea of the sort of work you can expect to be doing if you stick with us.'

'Roughing up the proletariat, you mean?'

'No, no, Clem, don't be shallow. For me, the proletariat doesn't exist. I only recognize two classes: responsible citizens who pull their weight; and self-seeking hooligans who, whether they realize it or not—and the worst of them don't realize it—threaten the very fabric of society.'

I grinned at him, 'Which side are we on?'

Pursing his lips he turned away to pace around for a while. 'You can cry off if you want to, Clem. It may be that I've made a mistake and that our point of view isn't yours. Or perhaps I simply don't understand your brand of flippancy.'

'I'm not flippant,' I told him. 'I'm apathetic. To be brutally frank, the hell with your point of view. I just don't go in for points of view any more. But I've taken a handsome cheque off you and done nothing much to earn it so far; and as far as I'm concerned punching workers' heads is no worse than mixing drinks for the bloody bourgeoisie. But just let's have it straight: if you want a recruit for your strong-arm squad, O.K.; but crusading spirit is definitely out.'

He maintained the exaggerated, military keenness of his stare. 'All right, Clem, we'll rest content at that. I think I know enough about you to feel sure of your loyalty to the organization you serve. And one day, perhaps, I'll get to the bottom of this bloody-minded attitude of yours.'

So we left it at that. As I went out I heard the roar of cars starting away down the drive. There was a prickling over my skin and I wanted a drink badly and scowled at the thought that to get one meant battling through my fellow-warriors jugging up in readiness for the fun. So, instead, I went up to my room, flopped down on my bed and smoked, staring at the ceiling. The set-up was becoming clearer and clearer; and what the hell did I care, anyway? Studying the curling smoke I murmured to myself, 'The stupid bastards.'

Anyhow, there'd been enough genuine strikes when the militants had damn well asked for it; the fact that the one in which they got their come-uppance was a phoney should provide a crowning touch of pleasant irony.

I rolled off the bed, ambled along to the bathroom and took a shower. There was a long mirror on one wall and for some moments I stood in front of it naked, eyeing myself without friendliness. In spite of everything, my frame hadn't

lasted so badly: there wasn't so much flabbiness that I couldn't still see the rope of muscle around my loins. It had worn better than the face, anyhow. The face stared back at me, hard lines around the eyes, a saturnine twist to the mouth, a furrow in each cheek and grey in the retreating hair above the forehead.

'The really sad thing', I told my reflection, 'is that we can't persuade more of 'em to beat each other's heads in.'

I dressed and headed in search of that drink. The way down took me through a long gallery on the first floor and here I came across Esther sitting in one of the windows with a cigarette. This time she greeted me first. 'Off to the wars again, Mr. Morris?' She still accentuated the 'Mr.' ironically. I slowed up and spoke in an imitation of General Fletcher's incisive accent.

'You're fully in the pictchah, I take it?'

She studied me dreamily through the cigarette smoke. Behind her was a prospect of wintry, tattered flower gardens. 'Few secrets here are hidden from me. How about you?'

I shrugged. 'I always move about in an absent-minded haze, anyhow. I'm beginning to grasp one or two things, for what that's worth. Courtney Polaris organized his strike; now General Fletcher's going to break it up. Smooth co-operation all along the line.'

'Just so. Court controls Patchers anyhow, from a distance. That simplified things.'

'Yes, indeed,' I agreed, staring back at her. 'That makes it much simpler.'

She smiled briefly. 'You're going on this trip?'

'Yes. In spite of everything.'

'How do you mean?'

'General Fletcher is beginning to have doubts on the lines you suggested. Wondering whether I'm really sound officer material after all.'

She seemed to brighten up all at once. 'What makes him wonder about that?'

'Couldn't really say. I don't think I'm mad keen enough for his liking.'

'You're not? Why, what's wrong, Clem?'

We held each other's eyes, both conscientiously ignoring her first use of my Christian name. I shrugged again. 'Nothing's wrong. I'm simply not the mad keen type.'

She had got her guard up again quickly and spoke indifferently. 'But you're going anyway? Isn't it possible that it will be dangerous?'

I sneered. 'Dangerous? Like setting about a pack of old women with a baseball bat.'

She looked at me with a flash of bitterness and what might almost have been disappointment. 'And that's the way you like it?'

'Why not?' I leered at her. 'I'm no gentleman, and I like things easy nowadays.'

'So I noticed.' She was growing angry. 'I'm surprised you didn't stick to mixing drinks and mopping up dog's mess at the Delville.'

'I would have done,' I snarled, 'only in a cowardly fit of temper I beat the daylights out of the head barman. If you're worried about the poor workers, you should have seen what happened to him.'

Her eyes opened wide in extravagant admiration. 'Oh, come on, Clem,' she cooed, 'do tell me about it.'

'Some other time,' I grunted and turned away brusquely. 'At present I want a drink.'

I left her and pressed on for the bar in high irritation, both at her and at the fact that she had irritated me. As I descended the stairs I suddenly realized that irritation, like so many other things, was something I hadn't felt for a long time. I scowled thoughtfully, pondering the ridiculous way I

had boasted of having filled in Toni; there was no blinking the fact that Esther Gannelain was able to get under my skin.

At least she had got rid of my reluctance to mix in with the hearty gorillas around the bar. We had quite a good lunch-time session.

6

WITH A glance at my wristwatch I told the lorry driver beside me, 'Ten to eight. Take it easy. We don't want to get there too soon before zero hour.'

Ahead of us, Charles's lorry lurched heavily around a corner. There was a tarpaulin rolled down at the back, concealing the crowd of yobs with long sideboards and scruffy mufflers around their necks inside. I had a similar bunch riding behind me. There were also a couple of the General's men and another of them squeezed into the cab beside me. It had not long got light and the streets were damp and cold. We began making our way down a long road lined with a featureless brick wall on one side and, on the other, stacking yards heaped with drums and crates behind high wire-mesh fences. The sky was low, blue-grey and threatening, flushed in the east.

Charles Fairbrass's lorry slowed right down, crawled, halted. Beyond him I could just make out men, black, muffled figures, standing in the road; and beyond them again there was a thick dark cluster of them against the brick wall. We came up close behind the leading lorry and stopped. I twisted round to peer through the window into the back. Our cargo of bruisers, seated on benches, were looking expectant; I saw the glint of knuckle-dusters. Somebody mumbled something and one of my companions from Long Hall, as I had learned it was called, whirled on him with a threatening hand. The orders were, strict silence until we

actually leapt out. I couldn't see what was happening in front so I asked our driver.

'Couple o' pickets,' he answered, ' 'aving a chat with 'em.'

A man came around the near side of the lorry wearing a big cardboard badge. I snapped to my other companion, a man named Corby, 'Quick. Out.'

He looked at me vaguely, I leaned across him, opened the door and gave him a push. We both slid out and I got to the picket just as he had begun fiddling with the tarpaulin at the back of the front lorry.

'Don't do that,' I said, taking hold of his elbow. 'It's rude.'

He looked at us suspiciously. 'What you got in there? Gold?'

'It's a surprise,' I told him, leading him gently away. 'Not to be opened till Christmas.'

He didn't like my grip on his elbow and began to flap around a little with an angry, 'All *right*'. Corby crowded up beside him, grinning, and the picket began to take alarm. 'Now, look,' he began, 'don't you try——' Still holding him, I glanced at my watch. It was eight o'clock.

There was a commotion farther along the road and, looking over the picket's shoulder, I saw that a big haulage lorry was broadside on across the road, its nose towards where I could make out the posts of the gates. The black swarm of men had begun to surge around it. I smiled into the picket's face.

'Sorry about this.'

Then I uppercut him under the jaw. He went down like a sack full of sawdust and I banged on the tailboard of the lorry. 'Everybody out. It's started.'

The tarpaulin was whipped aside and they came tumbling into the road and headed in a purposeful trot around the lorry. I went with them as our driver gave a signalling blast on his horn answered by another blast from the last lorry in

the convoy, behind us. Charles Fairbrass had just emerged from his cab as I came up. Two pickets had been standing there and I saw the sick look in their faces as they began to comprehend dimly what was going on. They didn't have long. Charles caught one of them in each of his great hands by the scruff of the neck, lifted them clean off their feet and crashed their heads together, then flung them heavily down. I heard the grunt jerked out of one of them as his spine slammed against the concrete surface of the road. One of our tame yobs, shambling past, looked down at them, paused, and kicked the nearer hard in the ribs. The victim was a smallish man with a wrinkled face. His jaw gaped and his eyes were half open. I slowed down to a stroll.

Ahead of me there were warning shouts and some of the strikers turned to face the new threat as our party came up on them; but it looked as though Chuck Palmer's people were already amongst them and keeping them pretty fully occupied. I glimpsed a helmeted policeman using his truncheon freely and desperately; then, when I was close enough to hear the thud, a man in a leather jacket got him from behind with a cosh. Now, the seething black cluster around the lorry broke up abruptly into small groups: twos and threes punching at each other and slashing with coshes; men were stretched out or crawling around in the road. I saw Stuart Brent, snarling ferociously, swing at a youngish, square-built man. The striker bent skilfully at the knees and as he came up again inside the swing hit Brent in the stomach with all his weight behind it. My hands on my hips, I couldn't help nodding approval as Brent collapsed.

Charles, too, stood for a moment eyeing the victor with a grin. He showed him his left hand and the striker hit him with the same body punch; Charles, still grinning, jabbed his elbow into his face, brought his knee up and, as the other sagged with contorted face, smashed his heel down on his

instep. His opponent cried out, helpless now, and Charles banged his forearm into his throat. The striker slumped to the ground; Charles looked down at him with a laugh then raised his foot to stamp on his face. I took a step forward, reached between his thighs and pinched him in the crutch. He yelled furiously but I was close up behind him and he couldn't do much about it. He reached back for me and I took his fingers gently and had him in a judo lock.

There we seemed to be stuck. I stood motionless, pondering whether it would be a good idea to kill him outright while he gasped and grunted with rage and, every time he tried to move, with pain. Then one of our men came running past, alarm in his face and, when he saw us, astonishment. 'For Chrissake, you two,' he yelled, 'what in hell? Look out!'

There was a clattering on the road, accompanied by a creaking jingling noise. I glanced over my shoulder, slapped Charles on the back and released him.

'Break it up. Mounted police.'

They were coming for us hard, asking no questions, and there were a lot of them. There were men on foot with them as well; there seemed to be police everywhere.

Charles uttered a mighty curse, forgetting about me for the moment. We were already cut off from our lorries by the advancing baton charge; so we peeled off in opposite directions around the big lorry and saw more policemen approaching from the other end of the road. These boys weren't messing about, either; perhaps they had found out what happened to their comrade who had been coshed. I caught faint, momentary comfort from the sight of one of the hairy yobs felled by a mighty clout; then I dashed for the only remaining escape route, the gate into the factory. No pickets were guarding it now; any strikers who hadn't been laid out or had enough were as anxious as the rest of us to escape from the irate guardians of the peace.

Works' police, apparently, weren't on strike. A uniformed man stepped out of a doorway as I headed into the yard, and I found that Charles was retreating by the same route as myself. Without stopping, he picked the man up bodily and sat him down hard, then we ran for the shelter of the buildings. As we clattered through a silent assembly shop we heard the policeman blowing shrilly on a whistle behind us. We kept running until after about half a mile we pulled up, winded, in a loading bay. Here we looked at each other. There was no mistaking the sentiment in Fairbrass's face, but we were both too bushed by now even to spit.

I pointed to the steel rails running out of the bay. 'Along here. Make for the sidings.'

We took our time about it now, plodding over the sleepers. They led us eventually into a railway yard where one or two men were pottering, up a bank and through a wire fence until we stood on a road where everything seemed quiet. Charles placed his fists on his hips and crouched slightly.

'All right, Clem,' he said, still panting slightly and not altogether because of our recent marathon, 'now we can sort things out, eh?'

I stared coldly into his eyes. 'Listen, buster. Back in the Fascist war, I used to get *paid* for knocking off bastards like you. Try it on with me now and by God I'll bloody croak you.'

His aggressive stance slackened and he looked at me curiously. 'You know, I believe you would.' He stared down the road and grinned. 'This is quite a convenient point to have come out at. One of Chuck's cars is down there at the corner.'

'So?'

'What did you intend doing now, Clem?'

I waved a hand. 'Never mind. It just came over me this morning that I'm in the wrong line of country after all. So I'm getting out.'

Ignoring me for the moment, he stepped into the road and signalled. The parked car below us started up and began to approach. Charles turned back to me.

'Oh, no, Clem. Not as easy as that. You're not getting out. Not yet, anyhow.'

'Who says so?'

'I say so.' Stepping back a little he put a hand inside his leather jacket and took it out again holding an automatic. 'You promised you'd do for me. Now I promise I'll do for you if you don't come back with us nice and quietly. Bet me I wouldn't.'

I never bet on certainties. Charles went on softly, 'You see, there was something wrong about all those policemen. They shouldn't have been there in force like that. Looks suspiciously like a tip-off. And, after your performance this morning, Clem, I've got a shrewd idea where the tip-off came from.'

The car drew up beside us and a rear door swung open. Charles jerked the gun at me unpleasantly. 'Get in.'

There was no one about and in any case there wasn't much they could have done apart from putting pennies on my eyelids. I got into the car.

7

WE ARRIVED back during the afternoon without any more rough stuff but Charles kept the gun handy all the way. He used it to shepherd me into the house and to a small study-like room towards the back. As we made our way through the main hall I glimpsed Esther standing half-way down the stairs. She stared at me and at the pistol which Charles didn't bother to conceal; I gave her a toothy smile.

'You sit down there,' ordered Charles as we entered the small study, 'Stefan is going to keep an eye on you while I see General Fletcher. I shouldn't advise you to do anything to annoy Stefan.'

The Pole took over the automatic and we remained alone, looking at each other. He pulled out a packet of cigarettes and a holder with his free hand then laid the gun on the table beside him while he stuck the cigarette in the holder and lit it. I saw him give me a sly glance while he was thus engaged. He would have simply loved me to make a dive for the gun. A nice fellow.

In one corner stood a grandfather's clock which ticked the minutes away slowly and pompously. It had done a lot of ticking before the door opened again and General Fletcher came in. I saw at once that he was wearing his Court Martial look. Charles was with him and also Chuck Palmer, Phillips and a couple of others. He planted himself in front of the fireplace and stood looking at me for some moments.

'Stand up, damn you!'

His shout had a shrill edge to it that I hadn't heard before. The others looked at me to see if I was going to disobey. I did as I was told.

'I've heard what Mr. Fairbrass has to say about this morning. What have you to add?'

I gave him a grin. 'Bit of a bog-up, wasn't it? Like being in the Army again.'

Phillips sidled into a corner with his hand to his mouth. But it was he who halted Charles and one of the others as they lurched towards me by saying very loudly, 'Suppose!' and then finishing in a lazy mumble, 'we get the story before we start throwing the chairs about?'

'The story', said the General grimly, 'is what I'm waiting to hear.'

'There isn't much of a story; only a very muddled one. The police were swarming there. Charles thinks it was my fault because I wouldn't let him smash some character's face when he was on the ground.'

'Instead of doing your job, you attacked your leader? Sided with the strikers, in fact?'

I ruminated. 'No. I wouldn't say that.'

'You wouldn't. But I would! And once it was all over you had to be brought back by force. You sought to desert.'

'I'm sorry I couldn't give you longer notice. But when I saw our brave men charging courageously at the pickets, armed only with brass knuckles, coshes and razors, I suddenly realized I wasn't worthy to be of your number. I'm just a cissy.'

The General's eyes stabbed at me ferociously. There was a slight quiver in his cheek. 'Your change of heart occurred before this morning. Police weren't there in those numbers by accident or as a general precaution. They had been warned. And you, as the one man to show disloyalty, the man who has virtually made a boast of his cynicism, are the

obvious, the *only* suspect. All I want to find out now is whether you have the guts to admit that you betrayed us.'

I looked around at them. 'Heads I did it, tails it was me, eh?'

The General was starting to gobble. 'Just at present I'm not in the mood for your flippancy, Morris. The future of the Movement which I head has been jeopardized, today's action largely fruitless. Several of our own men are actually under arrest at this moment. This is not a time for me to be over-scrupulous—especially as I partly blame myself for bringing you here. You have given me no reason to believe you innocent of the betrayal; so, in view of the circumstances, especially your treacherous attack on Charles which I regard as a crime in itself, I shall proceed on the assumption that you are guilty.'

I sensed the others tensing themselves. My chest felt tight. 'So?' I asked as coolly as I could. He didn't answer. With a curt nod to Charles he went out. Palmer laughed unpleasantly. 'You'll find out,' he said.

Fairbrass, unsmiling, took over the gun again from Stefan. 'I ought to kill you. But we shan't do that. Not yet, anyhow. That can wait until we're in control. Until that time comes, you're going to remain here; and you're not going to enjoy your stay, I promise you that. There are cellars under this place, big ones, mostly disused. You'll start serving your sentence down there. And some of us are coming down with you now to teach you a lesson.'

Andy Phillips strolled over to the fireplace looking mournful. 'You really are a bloody fool, Clem,' he lamented. 'I thought you were going to be such nice company. Someone intelligent to talk to for a change.'

'Just what is intelligent', I demanded, 'about belonging to a clapped-out Fascist movement with a power-crazy brass-hat in control?'

He looked genuinely surprised. 'But this is the band-waggon to be on!' he exclaimed. 'Do you mean to say you haven't realized that the end of democracy is in sight? It's only waiting for someone to tip the applecart over.' He waved his forefinger at me and began talking; talking was obviously something he enjoyed and it seemed to be understood that he wasn't to be interrupted. The others, in no wise forgetting their purpose, waited for him to finish, Palmer shuffling his feet in some impatience. 'Has there ever been a time when politicians—all politicians—have been held in greater disrespect than today? No—not even in the eighteenth century. Has there ever been a time when people in general have shown less interest in the way they are governed? Again, no. They let anybody push them around and the most they can do is sulk. Even the middle classes, the traditional guardians of constitutional rights, have been discouraged, then soured by their helplessness in face of the many-headed multitude. The whole structure of parliamentary democratic government has been eaten away; it's just a façade now. And, at the same time, has there ever been an era when *personalities* have been so important or had such opportunities? The time is ripe for a personality to take over. And that is what we aim to achieve. The General is too pessimistic about this morning: the fact that the raid was broken up isn't really important. What is important is the fact that there *was* a raid: the first of many. We're pushing over the applecart. The old system is crumbling away in general disorder and we're helping it on its way. Then, when people are crying out for someone to impose a rule of law, a strong leader, already well-known and popular, will take over. He'll be hailed with rejoicing. It's happening everywhere else; it's going to happen here.'

He regarded me with a happy gleam in his eye, so engrossed in his disquisition that he seemed to have forgotten

that the man he addressed was on the point of getting his ribs beaten in down below in the cellars. The others certainly hadn't forgotten. Stefan put in, 'All right, we've had the talk. Now let's have the action.' He ran his tongue along his lips and studied me gloatingly. Phillips shrugged his shoulder.

'I can only repeat, I'm sorry, Morris.'

'So are we all,' sneered Charles. 'Come on, Morris: we want those teeth of yours out before dinner.'

I looked round quickly for a weapon but there was nothing within reach. Charles, following and understanding my glance, said, 'Don't bother. I'd rather not shoot you in the leg up here, but I will if I have to.'

They began to crowd in and I backed towards a corner hunching myself behind fists and elbows. I reckoned to kill just one of them before they got me; two was perhaps too much to hope for. From behind Charles's shoulder something whipped downwards with a flash and a solid thwack as it struck his wrist. He jerked out a startled oath and the gun clattered to the floor. A heavy voice said, 'Leave it there.'

Everybody paused, ludicrously rooted in fighting attitudes. A newcomer had joined us. After a moment I recognized the round red face, the burly frame and thin golden hair: George, the ex-policeman.

'What the bleedin' hell', demanded Palmer in a voice now unashamedly cockney, 'do you think you're playing at?' Charles clutched his wrist and breathed hard; I noticed there was no mad rush to tangle with the newcomer. This was partly explained by the fact that he had a gun too, a thirty-eight revolver held in a steady, business-like fashion with no fancy frills close to his middle. I never saw a man more obviously, or more phlegmatically ready to shoot someone. He looked across at me and moved his head.

'Come on. Don't let's hang around.'

I began sidling around the walls towards him and the door. Charles, greatly daring, flung out an arm.

'Just a moment, Smith,' he said, 'let's make quite sure you know what you're interfering in. We're acting on General Fletcher's personal instructions.'

'That's all right,' George Smith answered, dead calm, 'I'm acting on instructions too.'

Charles swore. 'This is damned ridiculous. This fellow's a spy, a traitor; it was he gave the show away this morning.'

'No he didn't. We know who it was; and it wasn't him.'

They all stared at him. His face remained quite impassive.

'What d'you mean? Who was it, then?'

'Never you mind. Come on, Morris, if you are coming.'

'By God,' snarled Stefan abruptly. 'He's not strolling out of here as easy as that. What do you think we are?'

He made to lurch forward; then halted in his tracks as the ex-copper looked at him. It was an utterly empty look; the eyes were vague and lifeless and there seemed to be a dead quality about the whole of the ruddy face.

'I think you're a bloody mouthy little Polack, Ivan,' said George. 'You going to stop him walking out?'

The Pole looked vicious but left it at that. They stood in thick, baffled silence following us with their eyes as we went out of the room.

In the passage, George signalled with his head again. 'This way.' As we walked to a flight of back stairs and turned up them I remarked, 'Thanks.'

We both looked at each other carefully. He had put the gun away and a vestige of a smile appeared at the corners of his mouth. 'You needn't worry about me. I'm a genuine rescue party. Not come to put you quietly away or anything like that.'

'That's a relief,' I said. 'I got the impression in there that the boys are a wee bit scared of you—not just of the gun.'

He made a contemptuous noise. 'Them? Wind and wotsit. I did a long spell as a V.I.P. bodyguard; learned a few tricks that way. I don't take no bloody nonsense from that lot.'

We had mounted to the first floor and were walking through the gallery where I had met Esther the day before.

'Am I to take it', I asked, 'that you don't belong to the Movement?'

'I work for Mr. Polaris. Got no time for bloody movements.'

We came out of the gallery and into a small hallway where George knocked on a door. A voice inside said, 'Come in.' We went in.

It was a big room, heavily carpeted, with drawn curtains so that the log fire threw out a rosy light. The light winked on polished oak, cut glass, the sheen of Esther's hair as she sat in an armchair by the fire. Her eyes rested on me, dark and steady, as I entered. Polaris stood near her, a glass in his hand. He, too, inspected me with interest.

'Thank you, George,' he said after a while. 'Well done.' There was a note of dismissal in his voice, and the tone made me wonder whether tackling half a dozen thugs and a gun was something he sent him to do every day. George moved back out of the door but before he disappeared Esther called, 'George!'

Her voice, at any rate, was warm. The big man paused and she grinned at him: a nice grin. 'Thanks.'

Somewhere in his face was the faintest flicker but his voice was expressionless. 'Any time,' he said and went out.

Polaris moved over to a decanter on one of the oak tables and refilled his glass. 'Well, my dear,' he remarked thinly. 'He appears sound in wind and limb. I hope that will set your fears at rest. Sit down, Morris; get yourself a drink if you like.'

I liked. Filling my glass with rich brown sherry from the decanter, I took it over to an easy chair, sat down and waited. Esther was the first to speak.

'So you fell out with them after all?'

'I'm afraid so, Mrs. Gannelain.' I shook my head severely. 'Some of the chaps displayed a most *unsporting* attitude.'

'And what did you expect from that mob? I thought you had enough intelligence to realize what they were like.'

'That's what I'm curious to know,' remarked Court, coming back to us from the table. 'What happened to you this morning? Did it suddenly come over you that you couldn't, as a decent Englishman, approve of our companions' activities?'

I shrugged. 'Their activities don't bother me particularly. It was just that it suddenly struck me how much that fat oaf Charles and his strong-arm act irritated me.'

'Perhaps it would have been safer in that case,' Esther commented, 'to have masked your irritation. If I—if we hadn't found out what was going on you could have been in a nasty spot.'

'That,' I agreed, 'is very true.' I studied her curiously. 'It was nice of you to take the trouble.'

She turned her head sharply with a brief flare-up of her old dislike. 'Think nothing of it. I just didn't see why you should catch it for something you didn't do.'

That was an interesting admission. I should have liked a squint at Court to see what he made of it but could feel him watching me. So I simply said, 'Don't think I'm ungrateful. I've grown rather fond of my teeth. What happens next?'

Court sighed. 'That's really your problem, isn't it? We can provide transport to get you out of here; I hardly imagine you'll be anxious to stay. After that, it's up to you.'

I tossed back my sherry and dumped the glass down. 'O.K. When will this transport be available?'

'There's no hurry,' said Esther. This time, something in her tone did make me glance at Polaris. As I'd thought, he didn't like it. But almost instantly the mask dropped down again.

'He can stay if he likes, Esther,' he said flatly, looking at her, 'you know that. If he likes.' What he clearly meant was, 'If he dares.'

He turned away. I found Esther's eyes fixed upon me intently and smelt danger. But before I could announce that I thought I'd better be pushing along Polaris looked round at us with a sly little grin. 'By the way, Morris,' he said, 'some of those people have been rummaging in your room, I'm afraid. I managed to retrieve some of your property.'

He took a square of card from his pocket and laid it on the coffee table beside Esther's chair where we could both see it. Anna's picture looked up at me.

I sprang forward and made to snatch it up then forced myself to check and take it quite slowly from the table. Esther stared up at me with wide, dark eyes; Polaris gave me a friendly smile. 'A nice girl, Clem. Who is she?'

I knew I had turned white. For some moments I eyed him in silence and must have looked ugly because his face turned wary and Esther said in a low, urgent voice, 'Clem. Please.'

I put the photo in my pocket. 'An old flame,' I heard myself say with somebody else's voice. 'Have this car ready when you like. I'm getting out.'

His sinister clown's mask wasn't quite thick enough to conceal the glint of triumph in his eyes as I turned to the door. Esther stayed silent.

I went back to my own room without interference from anybody. There had been a search, all right, but they hadn't made too much mess. I stood and looked out over the garden where it was growing dark. The old memories floated behind my eyes; at present, they didn't hurt, simply hung there like

a pipe dream. There was a tap at my door and I turned quickly as I heard it open. Safer to have locked it.

Esther came in. She slipped through, closed the door behind her and stood in front of it looking at me. Eventually, for something to say, I asked gruffly, 'Tell me: does Polaris know that it was you who tipped off the police about this morning's riot?'

She made a little grimace. 'There's not much he doesn't know.'

'Was it just a passing whim—or did you have a reason?'

'Didn't you get the message when I talked to you yesterday? I don't like what's going on. It's criminal violence and it stinks.'

'How does Polaris feel about it?—About the tip-off, I mean.'

She shrugged. 'He didn't say. Sometimes I get the impression he hardly cares about this scheme he's running.'

'That he's running?'

'Of course.' Her eyes widened. 'You didn't imagine that this was General Fletcher's show, did you? He provides the thugs and leads them and makes the speeches; but he isn't really much more than a figurehead. The brains are Court's.'

I nodded absently. 'Thought so. He's going to be the power behind the throne?'

'That's it. If it comes off, he stands to do very well out of it. If it falls through, that will be the General's hard luck. It won't touch Court. It won't even cost him much, not in the figures he's accustomed to deal in.'

'If he's the boss, why all that pantomime with George Smith just now? Why didn't he just tell them to turn the heat off me?'

'Those men take orders from the General, not from Court. And Court can't actually order the General about; he has to feel that he's independent.'

After a moment she said in a low voice, 'You lost her, didn't you?'

'Lost whom?'

'The girl in the picture.'

'That's right.' I felt dreary, bored, almost, with the whole thing. 'I lost her.'

'And that's why you ended up in the Delville; and here.'

I gave her a savage grin. 'A hackneyed story, isn't it?'

'You don't seem to think so.' She came farther into the room. 'But don't you think it's time you began to fight back?'

I started to laugh, then stopped. After all, how was she to know? 'I understand your meaning. It's wrong and foolish to let a broken romance ruin my entire life. Quite correct. But there's more to it than that, honey.'

'How much more?' Her voice was urgent. 'Tell me.'

For the first time ever, I found myself talking about it.

'I saw the whole war,' I said, 'although I wasn't quite twenty-five when it finished. But I'd been to quite a good school and was commissioned early on in quite a good regiment. I was that type. A bit thick to begin with and young enough to suffer from crusading spirit. After the invasion of Yugoslavia they discovered that I'd spent most of my childhood there because my father taught in Belgrade University so I was seconded for special service and eventually wound up in Jugland behind the German lines. A sort of technical advisor with a team attached to the partisans. Most of the team was wiped out by the time we'd been there a fortnight.'

'I got old pretty quickly. I was out on my own at a time when the war was at its hardest. We had to rely for supplies on what we took from the Germans, we spent a winter on starvation rations, we all got dysentery and a lot died of typhoid. On top of that, the fight between Communists and non-Communists was already boiling up and I personally

shot two men for using ammunition against Chetniks. Little things didn't help much; a Jug friend of mine was standing next to me when a mortar bomb blew his guts in my face. So I got to the point where I was ready for a crack-up.'

I gestured towards the single armchair. 'Here, sit down, for God's sake. You're tiring me out.'

She did as she was told. The room was deep in shadow so I switched on the small lamp which stood by my bed. The circle of light fell on Esther; I preferred to stand outside it where she couldn't see my face.

'Part of my distinguished war career most people haven't heard about is the episode when I did a spot of malingering. I was hit; nothing serious; a bomb splinter in the shoulder; but I made the most of it. I didn't want to stick my neck out any more, so I skulked in what passed for a hospital in a mountain cave, pretending I wasn't fit. The only person I kidded, probably, was myself. Then I met Anna.'

It had started to rain outside. The wet beads drummed gently against the black window pane and hung there glistening in the light from the lamp. At length I felt I couldn't stand the sight of them any longer and pulled the curtain across.

'She was nineteen, mad keen for the cause—couldn't blame her really, the S.S. had knocked off her entire family—and about this time she joined the partisan unit I was with. We started off with a couple of rows over my shameful reluctance to go out and get killed, then fell for each other, hard. Very hard. You probably know what these wartime affairs were like; any moment might be the last, especially in the situation we were in, so every minute we could snatch we made the most of. Oddly enough, I stopped being scared after that and got back into things; and all the time we weren't blasting Jerry, or being blasted, we were away on our own making love. Even then, a lot of people frowned on us; they took the view

that there wasn't time for that sort of thing and that we ought to be entirely dedicated to the Struggle. Of course, we didn't give a damn for them.'

I lit a cigarette, forgetting to offer one to Esther. I was starting to choke as I talked.

'Unfortunately, however, we won the war quite soon after. From then on, the heroes of the fight against Fascist oppression were free to get cracking on their own, and, as you know, they did. The Titoists were in control and lost no time in starting a purge of rivals who might be dangerous. People I had fought with were arrested, charged with collaboration and executed. And the men who shot them were also people I had fought with. Straight away, of course, I had become an agent of the Anglo-American imperialist oppressors and no one dared be seen with me. Except for Anna; and she didn't last long.'

I pressed out my cigarette in an ashtray. The red ash burned my finger tip. 'I guessed what was coming, of course, and tried to arrange with my own headquarters to have her taken out with me, but it was impossible. I can see now, in a way, that there was nothing they could do, but at the time I wasn't feeling very charitable and blamed them nearly as much as I blamed the reds. So we tried a break for it on our own. The last time I saw Anna was when the Jug guards stopped us. They gave me what they laughingly called a safe-conduct and dumped me over the border in northern Italy. Anna was accused of spying in front of a military court and found guilty. They shot her.'

I turned back to Esther with an amiable grin. 'So perhaps you can understand that I started off with a prejudice against the brave new world we battled so hard to win. I explained this very carefully to my C.O. when they tried to hang an M.C. on me; the result was that I was quietly smuggled out of the Army with the help of a psychiatrist.'

Esther was smoking one of her own cigarettes. 'What happened afterwards?'

'Oh, nothing much. I lost interest. For a while I made some money running guns from Italy to Palestine but then the Palestine war ended and it didn't take me long to blue the profits. By the time they'd gone I was locked up in a nice hospital with bars in the States taking a compulsory alcoholic cure. After that I gradually drifted back over here; and here I am.'

Esther stubbed out her cigarette. Without looking at me she remarked in a voice that had become once more cold and indifferent, 'You can have the car, if you like. But it's getting a little late for driving. You'd do better to stay here.'

'You think so, do you?' I scowled at her. After the relief of letting the whole story out the reaction was setting in. I felt flat and sneered at myself. What was I trying to do, impress her as a tragic hero? Esther stood up and strolled towards the door.

'Why not? Nobody will bother you. Court's arranged that.'

'Thank him for me nicely, will you?'

She hadn't opened the door. Instead, she turned the key in the lock and turned to face me once more. There was no mistaking the look in her face this time.

'Perhaps you'd like me to leave you to weep into your pillow,' she suggested softly. Abruptly her mouth trembled. She put out both hands towards me, then I had a hand twisted in her hair, pulling her head back while I kissed her and the only noise was our hard breathing and the tapping of the rain at the window.

8

'WHAT ABOUT Polaris?' I asked, staring under my lids at the ceiling with Esther's smooth, thick hair in the crook of my arm. She stretched one leg lazily under the bedclothes.

'Mmh? What about him?'

'Perhaps I've got the set-up wrong; but isn't this sort of thing likely to get him in a tender spot?'

'I suppose so, in a way. But it's just something he has to put up with.' She emphasized the 'has' slightly. I considered the point idly.

'There aren't many things a man with Polaris's money *has* to put up with.'

'No. But I'm different. I can make him do a lot of things. The way I made him get you out of that trouble with the General's men. We have a—a kind of arrangement about this sort of thing, anyway.'

'Oh.' There was a heavily flowered paper on the wall of the Southampton hotel room where we were lying, a varnished, seedy-looking chest of drawers in one corner by the window. A thick crack wound tortuously across the plaster of the ceiling. Twisting my mouth, I wondered how frequent this 'sort of thing' was; remembered Les; remembered, too, the way Stuart Brent had talked in the bar that first afternoon about the Black Widow and the way her boy friends had of dropping out of the race.

Perhaps I should have been tormented by jealousy, haggard at the idea of the impermanence of the affair; but I wasn't. I sprawled with closed eyes, not feeling anything, not thinking very much. Anna still lay between us; which rendered our love-making more rewarding, if anything, in a way. Each of us took what we wanted with an intense, self-centred pleasure. I had left Long Hall, unmolested, the day after the rumpus and Esther's visit to my room. This was the second time she had come to me in the back-street hotel where I was stopping until the money ran out. The rest of the time, I just loafed; but I didn't drink so much nowadays.

'How long does the arrangement usually last?' I couldn't help asking.

'No, Clem.' There was appeal in her voice. 'None of that, please. I don't know any more than you do how long we can go on. But don't let's wreck it before we have to.'

'O.K.,' I mumbled. 'Suits me. But I have to admit I don't really understand what it is between you two.'

She laughed harshly. 'Never mind, you're not alone in that. It's a long-standing relationship, let's leave it at that. I don't want to talk about him.'

So we didn't. We had better things to do. Eventually it was evening and time for her to go. I saw her to her car.

'Watch yourself, huh?' I said when she had the engine running. She gave me a bitter grin.

'You bet. See you Thursday.'

'Same time, same place.' The car roared away leaving me staring after it. I understood the bitterness; the street was a narrow one, mainly of houses converted into slum flats. Children were screeching around a lamp-post, across the road tinny piano music was racketing through the glaring frosted windows of a crummy pub. The conditions under which our assignations took place weren't exactly idyllic. I wondered why she bothered to come; then, abruptly, found

myself uneasy. It was the thought that perhaps she wouldn't bother again.

There was no escaping the fact that it wasn't a pleasant thought. I recognized that my hours of idleness were beginning to revolve around the cathartic moments I spent with her. Already, now that she was gone, I felt restless. I surveyed the pub across the street and pondered going inside for a couple.

I saw him then, briefly, in the light from the windows. A short glimpse, but enough; he had looked towards me briefly as he walked away in the same direction that Esther had followed: hands stuck in the pockets of his reefer jacket, collar turned up; Les, without a doubt.

Motionless at the kerb, I pulled out my cigarettes and lit one. How long had he been around? Perhaps he had just moved in, perhaps I was going soft in my old age. In any case, I had better look into it so turned and began to stroll after him on the opposite side of the road.

'Hullo, Clem,' someone said from a doorway. I ducked, chopping sideways with the edge of my hand and caught him across the liver. He yelped and sagged, clutching at the brickwork.

'For God's sake,' gasped Andy Phillips, 'what was that for?'

'Nerves,' I explained. 'Never jump out at me from doorways.'

'I'll remember that,' he moaned, massaging his middle. I looked around swiftly. There was no one particularly near us and no one at all taking any notice. Close by was an alleyway; I grabbed him, hustled him in front of me and into the alley, my face tight with a hard, cold, businesslike savagery.

'Here,' I snarled. 'You need setting up,' and slammed him under the heart. His face turned grey and twisted up. He made no effort to defend himself.

'You bloody swine,' he croaked. 'Cut it out. If this had been that sort of show, do you think they'd have sent a one-armed man up against you, on his own?'

It was the way in which he said 'one-armed' with a kind of bitter anguish in his tone which for some reason I had not expected from him that made me pause, more than anything else. I scowled at him suspiciously. 'Then what are you doing here? And in any case you're not alone.'

Leaning against the wall, taking his time about breathing, he flicked a glance at me. 'Spotted him, eh?' he muttered.

Finally he straightened up and all at once became his normal urbane self once more. 'O.K. You're a rough bastard. I don't know why I don't simply stalk away in a huff.'

'Neither do I,' I said, watching him.

'All right.' He half turned and looked as though he was going to do just that. Then he faced me again. 'I won't say you'd be sorry if I did. You might not have time. But in spite of this little fracas I still dislike the set-up. If you want to learn something to your advantage about you-know-who, lead me to where I can get a drink.'

I shrugged and we marched in silence to the pub across the road. It was as seedy inside as out: bare floorboards, a pallid varnish on the woodwork the same shade as the lifeless bitter that stood in one or two glasses, a bald pianist in shirt-sleeves hammering out the year before last's top ten in clumsy chords. Phillips ordered Scotches and we stood with them at one end of the bar in a corner. I stood facing the door.

'All right,' I suggested. 'Supposing you unburden yourself?'

He squinted at me with a sad, self-mocking smile. 'I'll tell you everything I can; there's little to relate. The situation is roughly this: you have friends, it appears, or a friend, in influential quarters. No names, no pack drill. The Movement, however, doesn't intend letting you get away as easily

as all that. Some of them still prefer to think it was you who gave that show away; in any case you defied them; and on top of that, an ex-member who knows what they're up to is a danger. So they have to find some way of dealing with you so that they won't be blamed themselves by their big backer. They've found somebody now to do just that. Guess who?'

'And what brings him back into the picture?' I demanded. He made a scornful grimace.

'Let's call it, in his case, infatuation. He has loved and lost. But Les—my God, I've actually mentioned a name—Les is conceited, stubborn, stupid and vicious. He won't believe that he can possibly lose. So he hangs around. Naturally he's grown very fond of you on discovering that you have—well, we won't go into that, eh?'

'I am impressed', I remarked, 'at the delicacy of your sentiments.'

He made me a little bow. 'So Charles and one or two others get next to him, give him all the relevant information and a little more—like telling him, for example, that it's only you who's keeping him out in the cold—and make him an offer. Les, being the bloody-minded oaf he is, takes them up on it. So now he's out to get you.'

'And how badly is he out to get me?'

'If you mean, how keen is he? He's very keen. If you're asking how much harm he aims to do you: a lot of harm.'

'I see,' I reflected, twirling my glass. 'But he's working more or less on his own?'

'More or less. The Movement tells him how to find you, what you're up to, etc., and leaves him to it. So he can see you, knows how to get at you, while, at the moment, you can't see him.'

'No,' I agreed thoughtfully, looking at him. 'Not at the moment.' I ordered a couple more Scotches then turned back to him. 'All right, buster, just what is your game here?'

He sighed. 'Oh, pride, I suppose, in the first place. Quite an efficient substitute for many of the virtues. I don't like to feel mixed up in piddling, back-stabbing nastinesses of this sort. It's not what I joined the Movement for. Then again, I know it sounds wet, but I've taken rather a liking to you.'

'Isn't that being terribly disloyal?'

'No. This is mainly Charles's show, not the General's. And Charles, for all his good points, is, I'm afraid, rather vulgar.'

'O.K. Now tell me how to find Les.'

'He's not stopping anywhere where he might be traced after dealing with you. He's got himself a kind of hide-out.'

'Where?'

'There's a new housing estate going up, a couple of miles outside the town along the road to Salisbury. At one edge of it, farthest from the road, stands a bungalow—not much more than a summer chalet, really. It's not used now because of the housing estate; it's actually owned by a member of the local Wooden Spoon Club. That's where he stays, when he's not stalking you.'

I lit a cigarette. 'I see. Might be handy to know.'

'It might,' agreed Phillips and gave me more precise details for finding the estate while I meditated. Finally I heaved myself away from the bar and said, 'All right. Thanks for the tip. I'll watch myself.'

'You do that, Clem,' he advised me in friendly fashion. 'I wouldn't want anything to happen to you after sticking my neck out in this way to prevent it.'

'Don't worry; I'll do my best to spare you such distress. Give my love to the General and tell Charles where to stick his jack-boots.'

I left him and went out into the street, black-browed. Phillips struck me as a level sort of character; even his motives for belonging to General Fletcher's crummy Movement were understandable: his disgust with democracy, his

bitterness about his lost arm. I wondered how he had lost it. Then I brooded on Les, reflected on what I knew about him. It wasn't much. But what Andy Phillips had said about him was in line with what he had done to Courtney Polaris.

I wasn't Courtney Polaris, however. The Movement, I thought grimly, should have remembered the old saying about sending a boy to do a man's job.

A twenty-minute bus ride brought me to the stop, an isolated pub, which Phillips had described to me as near the housing estate. From here, a thirty-yard walk led to a point where the earth had been scraped bare and churned into mud around a row of council houses standing empty. I was out in the country now and turned down a lane with fields on my right, the mess that was to be the council estate on my left. I walked the length of it, looking out for signs of life. I didn't see any; not even a night watchman. It had got darker. At the far corner of the estate I leaned against the trunk of a tree and surveyed the scene while wind hissed rhythmically through the branches above me and all around was a murky shadow without a single light to be seen anywhere. The sky was a wet, featureless pall. I hadn't realized it was still possible in England to cut oneself off so completely from humanity. But perhaps I wasn't utterly out of touch. Les might be not so far away, sweating about Esther Ganne-lain and what he'd like to do to me. Not only Les, I reflected. It could be a set-up, after all. The place might be alive with Charles and his pals. I checked myself in the act of reaching for a cigarette. This was no time to show a light. I must be getting out of practice.

I still hadn't seen any sign of the bungalow. It was cold so it didn't take me very long to decide that it was time to set about looking for it. With a dark line of hedge to cover me, I clambered up the bank which edged the road and stood surveying the building site.

It looked like a battlefield. Putting things up or blowing them down, it was funny how the effect looked the same while work was in progress. Walls stood breast-high amidst mounds of earth and rubble, window frames and bits of scaffolding were skeletoned starkly against the winter sky, mud and puddles glimmered vividly reflecting what feeble light there was. The shambles stretched away from me into shadow; the nearly complete buildings by the road were nothing now but humped patches of black. Over everything the clammy mist was gathering.

The ground seemed to be all rubbish or holes full of rain-water, but not far in front of me a greasy concrete road had been laid. I made my way across and began following it. Not good tactics, of course, but, hell, this wasn't a war; let's be comfy. All the same, I made no noise as I walked.

An owl hooted, back the way I had come, but that was the only sign of life. A long strip of wrapping paper, held down at one end by a scaffolding pole, flapped in the wind. Past a stack of bricks and the grotesque silhouette of a concrete mixer, I saw the shell of a house completed except for the roofing and studied it thoughtfully. It looked as good a place for an ambush as any. So I drew back under cover of the brick pile, out of sight of the dark window holes, and went around it the other way striking out away from the road so as to take the house from the rear.

I kept low now, using the shadows, taking care not to get my head silhouetted above the line of a wall, looking for my footing and moving out of the way stones and pieces of piping that looked likely to roll. It was slow, heavy going and my shoes were soon thick with mud and I found myself wondering why I was going to such trouble. Eventually I was behind the house which had roused my suspicions, some twenty yards away and protected by large piles of sand and gravel. Pushing my head cautiously around one side of these—I

knew better than to look over the top—I peered at the place again and remained as wise as I had been in the first place. It was probably as empty as it looked; or, within the darkness of the window frames, there could be eyes watching intently for a sign of movement.

Pulling my head back under cover I looked around me; and there, quite close at hand, was the bungalow. The road ran in a curve around the house I had been stalking and farther along it, on the far side, a low building stood on some rising ground. I could make out the shutters over the windows. The whole place was in complete darkness.

I made a wide detour to get to it, over part of the terrain which the road had not yet reached. The battleground feeling had got a grip on me now and I wasn't anxious to cross that road. I came up to the bungalow from one side and moved round to the rear.

There wasn't much of a rear to it, in fact. It was a wooden building and about a yard behind it ran a barbed-wire fence, almost submerged amidst nettles. I could smell their musty scent, the damp wood of a big rain butt, a tang of creosote. The first window I came to was shuttered; the next wasn't and, presumably through lack of protection from the local kids, had a hole in one pane and a big crack in the other. It was unlighted, of course. I stood perfectly still, listening; there was no sound. I cheered myself up imagining someone else on the other side of the wooden planks holding his breath and standing as still as I was.

Christ, I thought to myself abruptly, this wouldn't do. I was giving myself the heebie-jeebies. Les was just an irate youngster; I must be losing my grip, handling him as though he were an entire German patrol with armour and artillery support. So I turned and walked back noiselessly to the front. There was no real path leading to the door, only a number of bricks put carelessly down and trodden into the ground and

one of those iron grills for scraping your shoes laid in front of the sill. A wonder, I reflected, as I stood on it facing the door, that nobody had knocked that off.

Would he have a gun? Maybe he was crouched in there squinting over the sights until the door should swing open to reveal my silhouette. Only a waiting man could have been as silent as that; if he was in there at all. I reached out and pushed at the door very gently but it stayed shut. There was a heavy iron door latch to keep it closed. So I took hold of it to lift it in my left hand.

My legs seemed to fly from under me while something like an entire mule train kicked me in the stomach. Everything, door, bungalow, dead housing estate, the earth itself vanished into a crackling, searing blaze of light behind my eyeballs and I seemed to be hanging out in space by one hand with staring eyes and mouth straining open in the effort to breathe, and to scream. For I was being stretched on the rack at the last turn of the wheel; a steel band with razor-sharp edges was clamped around my chest and drawing tighter, crushing the ribs and biting into my flesh; and at the same time red-hot wires were threaded the length of my body and half a dozen devils were playing skiffle on them.

Then I was just floating in the dark.

9

‘LUCKY YOU’RE strong, buddy boy,’ remarked Les from somewhere in another orbit. ‘A jolt like that would have killed some people. Mains electricity.’

I was in a new, strange world, a world made up of bars of thick, dusty light running away to a focal point somewhere out of sight around the corner from my left eye, of a thick soft pressure holding me down, of Les’s disembodied voice, Olympian and lazy.

‘You were pretty quick off the mark. Hardly expected you this soon. That fellow must have given you a real pep talk to send you dashing up here so fast. Or is it just that you’re a man of action, huh?’

The dusty bars of light were floor boards under my cheek. The soft pressure was a blanket. Les was sitting on a hard chair to one side of me, the side my eyes were turned. Which side would that be, now?

‘Feeling better?’ asked Les. He sounded quite pleased. ‘Then you’d better drink some of this.’ He knelt beside me and hoisted me up into something approaching a sitting position, propping me up while he held a big china mug full of tea to my mouth. He even had to prop my head with his shoulder, I couldn’t operate my neck myself. ‘I’ve been doing artificial respiration on you. Walked right into it, eh?’

I recalled the iron grill outside the front door which had made such an excellent conductor. The tea was strong and sweet and I gulped at it. Les’s face was close to mine, There

was a thick black bristle around his chin and his eyes had a hard glitter to them. He was still wearing the reefer jacket and his hair could have kept a barber pretty busy. I finished the tea and he released me. At once I flopped back on to the floor boards. He stood over me and talked down at me.

'That's it, you take it easy. Give you some more tea in a minute. Maybe you were in poor shape anyway. Keeping Esther happy takes it out of you, eh? But you enjoyed yourself, I bet. Maybe you had a good laugh now and again at that poor dumb cluck Les, eh?'

He strolled away and came back with another mug of tea. 'Here, have some of this. You look proper seedy. Don't want you to flake out altogether. Not yet.'

I couldn't feel anything. Even when I fell back on to the floor there had been no bump, nothing. And I couldn't so much as crook my little finger; or, if I could, I didn't know I was doing it. He held me up again while I drank.

'I wish she could see you now, buddy boy. I should like to watch her face. But she'll find out all about it in good time, don't you worry. He'll take care of that.' He uttered a mirthless laugh. 'It's funny; me of all people, loving him the way I do, helping Court Polaris get his own back on the slut.'

I didn't try to say anything. There were pins and needles in my feet and my fingers. My limbs were coming back to life but ever so slowly. If only Les would keep talking long enough for me to be able to move.

'Well, it suits me,' he continued harshly. 'She had her fun out of me, then it was the push. That degenerate bastard Polaris helped put her up to it, and he learned his lesson; now it's her turn and you're going to help me, buddy boy. Because she likes you. You're not just another ram to make up for Polaris.'

He let me bump back on to the floor again and this time I felt it. I was also beginning to feel pain as well, sharp and

biting in my left hand. Les cackled mirthlessly. 'Have you worked out Mr. Polaris yet, Morris? Understood why he's so accommodating about Esther's little affairs on the side? Ever read books, Morris? Ever read Hemingway's *Piesta*? Well, that's it. He can't do a thing; but without her he's a dead duck. So he has to take the dirt she feeds him; but only up to a point. Then he turns nasty.'

He interested me; but not so much as to stop me concentrating on my hands and feet under the blanket. Staring vacantly up at him where he sat once more on his chair I was cautiously clenching and unclenching my fist. Very carefully, lest he should detect the movement, I stretched one leg. Les just went on talking.

'You've been out a long time, buddy boy. I had to work hard to bring you round. And while I worked and while I sat here watching you I occupied my mind in thinking of something really interesting to do with you. Something that would be *fun*. And I think I've got it, buddy boy.'

The pain in my hand was now intense. Try as I would, I couldn't help wincing under it. Les watched me calmly. 'I'm going out to check, see whether it can be done. But first it looks to me as though it's time to start fixing you up. You're looking much better now. Well enough to look scared, in fact.'

He stood up and walked away out of my line of vision. When he came back he was carrying a long length of coiled rope which he unwound casually. He stooped and pulled the blanket off me and jerked me up by my shirt. His Adam's apple was close and I reached for it to nip it between finger and thumb. But it was no use. I could move my arms again but only to flap them feebly like nylons stuffed with rags. I could make no resistance as he lifted my legs and swung my feet behind my head, holding them there with one arm. Grabbing my wrists he pulled my forearms around my

thighs to cross at the back and tied them there, taking plenty of time to make a sound job of it. From there he wound the rope around my body, pinning my knees against my chest and carried it on to tie my ankles. When he had finished I lay on the floor trussed up in a compact bundle with quite a long length of rope left trailing from my feet. I could see Les's muddy shoes and rolled-up jeans planted apart about a foot from my face as he stood over me.

'Now we'll cool off that grand passion of yours. I can't think of a pleasanter way of doing myself a spot of good.'

He went out, switching the light off as he closed the door behind him, leaving me to reflect in the dark on my position. What he was going to do I couldn't tell, except that it would be unpleasant. The shadows were seething around me and the floor had a tendency to rock. I knew now that the pain in my hand was caused by a great vicious burn where the current had entered me from the door latch. It would have been nice to pass out there and then. All right, I sneered at myself, you've spent long enough wishing you were dead, this looks like your big opportunity. But now it came to the point, I didn't want to go; at least, I told myself, not like that, with Les gloating over me.

God, I found myself thinking in panic, surely there must be a watchman or something here? Or let him come back and get it over with. The waiting was the worst—I hoped.

I remembered Andy Phillips's face as he watched me walk out of the pub into the trap. If I ever got out of this, Andy Phillips would be a permanent lesson to me.

And even now a part of my mind was occupied with some of the things he had been saying about me, about Esther and about Polaris. It had been quite an illuminating speech in some ways.

A chill shot through me as I heard feet outside the door and the rattle of the latch. The light was switched on again.

‘Can do,’ cried Les cheerfully. ‘Unless I’m much mistaken. Let’s go then, shall we, buddy boy?’

He picked up the free end of the rope, took it over his shoulder and tramped back out of the door, switching the light out once more. I slid along the floor behind him, over the doorsill and out into the clammy night, scraping on my back over the rough brick pathway, my feet up in the air. There was a moon now; how long I had been out I didn’t know but the air had that tomb-like midnight feeling. We went down the path and across the road; Les didn’t look round as I bumped down over one kerb and up over the other with a sickening jar to the base of my spine at the second bump. He plodded on steadily, hunched forward over the tow rope, dragging me through the rubbish, over scattered heaps of bricks, deliberately, it seemed, picking the worst route he could find, so that with every yard we went I collected fresh bruises. I slithered through thick mud taking a coating of it with me and splashed into an ice-cold puddle. The chill added to my mounting fear to make my bowels feel weak. My neck ached with the strain of trying to keep my head off the ground to avoid the bangs. I began to think seriously of yelling for help, but what was the use? It would give Les an added giggle and there could be no one for miles to hear. Had there been he would have taken the trouble to gag me.

The long drag came to an end at last. I didn’t know whether to feel glad or sorry because it meant the worst was now to come. Les flung down the rope and paused for a few moments mopping his face with his sleeve.

‘Warm work,’ he grinned breathlessly. I was sweating too, but it was a cold sweat. We had halted directly beside the concrete mixer and I began to get an idea of what Les had planned for me. He followed my gaze and grinned again.

‘She’s a big one. I checked. It may be a bit of a tight

squeeze getting you in, but you'll fit all right. Now I've got to fill her up. They drain these things during the cold weather.' He picked up a can which he must have brought out in readiness on his first visit and busied himself with the engine. I lay there and tried to empty my mind. It looked as though I was in for a rough ride; but perhaps I could survive it. On the other hand, perhaps this was just Les's fun and he intended to finish me off afterwards. The haul on the rope had made my bonds painfully tight.

The engine of the machine wheezed asthmatically, faltered a couple of times and then began to chug. Les pulled a lever and the mixer began to turn, swinging around in a broad circle as it revolved. Lex watched it for a while then, satisfied, stopped it and let the engine tick over. Turning the wheel at one end he swung the barrel over on to its side with its dark mouth towards us. Then he turned and bent over me.

'Your turn in the barrel tonight,' he chuckled.

He pulled me up by my shoulders and slid one arm around my back, another inside my knees. With a strong heave he got a thigh underneath me, then managed to pull me across his shoulder, my head behind him. Then, slowly, he straightened and stood up. I saw the dark mouth of the barrel in front of my face and could just make out the ugly-looking mixing blades around the inside; then Les gasped and dropped me at his feet.

'Christ, buddy boy,' he puffed. 'How much do you weigh?'

I lay there with all the breath shaken out of me by the fall. Les, nothing daunted, stooped and grabbed me again. I could see his heavy breath rising in a cloud as he hauled me up; he dragged me up in front of him this time with one arm under my seat, the other clasping my back so that we swayed for a moment cheek to cheek. I turned my head and took a good bite at his ear.

He swore and tried to pull his head away but I clenched my jaws savagely and my teeth met through his cold, salty flesh. Les let out a yell and dropped me; and as I fell I tensed my jaw muscles in an agony of fury and despair, my eyes shut with the strain. Les tumbled with me, screaming as the weight of my body and the impetus of my fall tore at the flesh of his ear. In a heap on top of me he scratched and hammered at my face, seized my nose and chin and wrenched my mouth open to free himself then rolled away with a sob. I spat blood and shreds of skin with gloomy satisfaction.

'You bastard,' croaked Les unsteadily, on his feet once more, 'Jesus, you bastard.' He had a hand to the side of his head and I thought I could make out blood oozing between the fingers. Then stars leapt and rocketed in front of me as he kicked me in the face. Another kick followed and my face seemed to swell to twice its size before going numb; dull, aching agony rolled through me as he followed up with one to the kidneys. His rage seemed to give him extra strength; crouching low, he scooped me up from the ground and swung me around his shoulders and once more the mouth of the mixer barrel yawned in front of me.

Les turned so as to shove me up to the barrel and into it backwards so that I would rest in it with my head at the opening. There was absolutely nothing I could do to stop him, still dazed from the kicks; but the aperture was barely large enough to let me through and for some time Les, bent at the knees, pushed and punched at me unavailingly so that I thought that perhaps he would have to let me drop again. But he had got my feet and rump inside with my knees jammed against the edge; at length, with an upward shove he rammed them closer against my chest and over the lip, tearing trousers and skin off them. The iron rim of the barrel mouth scraped along my spine as I slid through; for a while

I was stuck there by my shoulders, with Les's bloodstained face staring grimly into mine; then, with a final heave he had succeeded in getting me inside, my head resting on the rim, one of the ominous mixing blades already cutting into my hip.

With everything set, Les stepped back, a dark, diabolical figure in the moonlight. Then he cursed, pulled a face and took out his handkerchief to dab gingerly at his torn ear. He looked at it and there must have been a lot of blood because he became absorbed in his efforts to staunch the flow. The motor of the mixer was still ticking over.

Les had the handkerchief folded into a triangle and was endeavouring to bind the wound with it, but it wasn't an easy task. It seemed that, when on the receiving end, he wasn't such a hard boy after all. He noticed me watching him and growled, 'You wait, buddy boy. I'll be with you in just one minute.'

But something else had drawn my attention away from him: there was a different, stronger light in the sky, a vague glare which moved. Les hadn't noticed it yet; but suddenly he jerked his head back, listening. We both heard the unmistakable roar of somebody revving an engine to change down, quite close at hand. Les stood uncertainly for a few moments then took a few irresolute steps towards the mixer to start it up.

As he did so, light struck him with an almost physical impact, a powerful beam which held him transfixed as though caught by a searchlight. I heard the car come roaring down upon him. Les flung up a forearm to shield his eyes, turned and began to run. He vanished from my field of vision and, moments later, I saw a big black car swooping along the road after him like some huge hunting animal. That, too, vanished from sight and all I could see was the glare flung up by the headlights wheeling about the sky and the broken

ground. There was a sharp screech of brakes and the engine stopped and for what seemed a very long time I was left with only the chug of the mixer motor to keep me company. I wondered if there was any way by which these things could start themselves; if this one should, there was nothing I could do about it. Waves of giddiness swept over me once more.

'Hey!' I yelled at last. 'Over here.'

At least, it was meant to be a yell. To me, it sounded more like a hoarse whisper. I tried again; but all I got to show for it was the noise of the car starting again and moving off with a roar.

My despair lasted only a few moments, however. Then the car reappeared, driven hard in reverse. It jerked to a halt as it came abreast of where I was stuck and two men jumped out, in uniform, with shiny peaks to their caps. I saw now the lighted sign above the windscreen: *Police*. They approached warily, then one of them sprang forward, exclaiming, 'Good God! There's someone inside.'

He caught me by the shoulders and pulled but it looked as though getting me out of the thing was going to be as big a problem as getting me in had been.

'Someone's been having a fair old game up here,' grumbled the policeman. For a copper, he sounded quite shocked. He uttered a sharp exclamation of displeasure and moved himself smartly to one side, although he didn't let go of me. My head sticking grotesquely over the rim of the concrete mixer, I was vomiting over his shoes.

10

'SO GLAD you're feeling better,' remarked Polaris. 'I'd have looked in on you before but Esther said you needed rest.'

Rest was what I had been getting, sprawled in a large soft bed surrounded on all sides by luxury and the best of medical care. I had been barely hours in the hospital when a car arrived to whisk me away to a villa near Egham, a more modest retreat than Long Hall, and pleasanter. Here, a sleek, expensive-looking doctor had surveyed the wreckage and given instructions to a pair of nurses, but before long Esther had taken charge. There wasn't, in fact, a lot to do; what I needed principally was a lot of sleep. Now it was afternoon two days later. A big fire was burning in the grate and a cosy winter sun splashed through the curtains on to the rugs. I lay and felt lazy.

'I must say, though,' went on Court, 'that your face looks almost as bad as mine did recently. A ferocious young devil, isn't he? Never mind, the police are after him.'

'They are, eh?' I answered woodenly. During my waking moments I had been pondering the things Les had had to say about Mr. Polaris, adding them to what Brent had said. As a result I was wary of him, warier than ever.

He knew it, of course. I could tell from his face that my suspicion amused him. He poured some sherry into a glass, sat on the corner of a table and surveyed me.

'Rather an ingenious form of maltreatment,' he commented. 'I wouldn't have given him credit for enough imagina-

tion.' He invited me with his eyes to take him up on it; I did. 'Perhaps someone suggested it to him.'

He nodded judicially. 'Yes, it's a possibility. Some of Fletcher's crowd, you mean?' I didn't say anything. He went on, 'Made you look rather a fool, really. But I don't suppose you had time to think about that?'

I stared back at his smile of insolent inquiry. 'Yes, I've thought about it. It was the feeling of helplessness that was worst. I felt quite impotent, Mr. Polaris.'

I was really asking for it. The veils dropped over his eyes, he began shuffling around the room, picked at a bunch of grapes. 'Know what I think, Clem?' he asked after a while with his back to me. 'I think you're accident prone. First it was the General's men, now it's Les. We always seem to be pulling you out of some sort of trouble.'

'I did the same for you once. Remember?'

'Yes, I remember. But I learn from my mistakes, Clem.'

'And what sort of lesson would you say was to be learned from my recent misadventures?'

Polaris studied his delicately manicured finger-nails. 'I should say the lesson was that you're keeping dangerous company. You need to get away. For example, Fletcher's outfit have got it in for you. I carry a certain amount of weight with them; but I can't guarantee to keep them off you for ever, Clem.'

'Sounds nasty.'

'It could be. You'd be much safer a long way away from them. Take the West Indies, for example.'

'O.K. Let's take the West Indies.'

'I could suggest quite a lucrative post with an export agency in Jamaica. A paying thing for the right man.'

'What makes you think I'm the right man?'

'Oh, you're the right man, Clem,' said Polaris. 'Don't you worry about that.'

'Look,' I asked, 'if you're so anxious to see me out of the way, just why the hell did you have me brought here?'

A silly question, of course; it had been Esther, not Polaris. But I wondered if he would admit it. He didn't.

'I have my reasons, Clem,' he said, regarding me with wide, inscrutable eyes. 'It's always been my custom to look deep into the future; that's one reason why I got where I am today. And, somewhere in the days to come, perhaps I can see a niche for you. But it would really be far better if you went to the West Indies.'

'Thanks,' I said, leaning back on the pillows, 'I'll think about it. Perhaps I had better look deep into the future as well.'

'You do that, Clem,' Court answered. 'But remember: it's not given to all of us to shape the future; some people are in a better position to do that than others.'

While he was waiting for me to tremble at the hidden menace in his words Esther came back into the room. She favoured him with a cold glance.

'Hullo. How long have you been here?'

'Oh, just looked in to pass the time of day. You've been neglecting me, Esther, in your preoccupation with the invalid. You must come and cheer me up some time, there's a good girl.'

'Oh, for God's sake,' snapped Esther. Court held a muscattelle between his white front teeth, popped its skin delicately and regarded her. 'Just for a while. This evening, say?'

They held each other's eyes without much friendliness for a space, then Esther shrugged and turned away.

'All right,' she muttered, 'I'll look in after dinner.'

Polaris was all geniality at once. 'That's fine. I'll see that Clem isn't neglected.' He turned to me and promised, 'I'll send you up a case of champagne and a television set. I'm told there's an extremely interesting programme on model yacht building.'

He waved to us and slid out of the door. Esther came over to me at once and began rearranging the pillows. I grinned up at her and murmured, 'Don't fuss.' She stooped and kissed me hard. From the time I was brought from the hospital our affair had been switched on with a new intensity and a tenderness that had not existed during our previous fierce encounters. The two nurses had been practically pushed out of the room. Esther insisted on doing everything that needed doing herself. Now she asked grimly, 'What did he want?'

'He's been giving me the gipsy's warning. I gather this madness of ours has gone on long enough. He's getting fed up with sharing you.'

She turned her head away abruptly and straightened up. 'I see. I found out what you asked me: that police car wasn't just passing; they received a telephone message from an anonymous caller that something was going on up there. There was another thing, too. When they got there, Les ran for it; but he ran straight for a car and made off in that. The police couldn't follow because he ducked through a hedge on to the road and they would have had to drive back off the estate again before they could start after them.'

I lit a cigarette. 'According to Phillips's story, that would have been one of the General's boys waiting for him. But there's no real reason to believe anything that Phillips said.'

She frowned. 'Maybe not; but it has to be someone.'

I left it at that. 'What interests me more is who gave the police the tip.' I gazed at the tobacco smoke curling above me. Esther said in a low voice, 'No, Clem. This was one they didn't get from me. You didn't really imagine I knew anything about it, did you?'

'Not really. But I wanted to get it straight to avoid lousing up the issue with false scents. It almost looks, then, as though there's a mysterious unknown involved, eh?'

She nodded with a little shiver. After a while she said, 'Well: tell me about the gipsy's warning.'

I shrugged. 'Nothing else to tell. He asked me to be a good fellow and take a job he had lined up in the West Indies; and hinted that if I didn't things would get really rough.'

She kept her eyelids lowered. 'What do you intend to do?'

I squinted up at her. 'I don't imagine he's offering a passage for more than one.'

'I asked you', she repeated with a tremor of tension in her voice, 'what you intended to do.'

My eyes on her still, I said, 'Supposing you tell me, Esther? After all, you're the one it all hinges on. How fond are you of Polaris these days?'

She moved her head in a sad kind of gesture. 'It's time, I suppose, I explained to you a little about Court and myself.' She lit a cigarette for herself and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall.

'The war wasn't much of a time for me, either. My parents lived in France. After the collapse we were in the Vichy half but of course they were both interned. They managed to farm me out, however, with a French family and I lived with them for the rest of the occupation. I never heard of my parents again. My foster-parents were Vichy supporters and after the liberation they were arrested by the Resistance men. I was left, sort of spare. I was fifteen, growing quite pretty, I suppose, and there were openings for good-looking girls of fifteen at that time. But I was saved from such a shameful fate by a man whom Court had sent out to attend to his affairs. He'd had contacts in Vichy France all along—it was quite O.K. with the British government because they found his services very useful from time to time. Now that the Germans were gone he wanted to stake his claim in the new share-out. This fellow learned I was English, took a paternal interest in me and was quite decent to me. Then, through

him, I met Court who now arrived in person. He took charge of me, made a tremendous fuss of me and talked about adopting me. Of course, at that time I thought it was splendid being the spoilt child of a multi-millionaire. Even when I found his interest was not paternal I was far from worried. It was quite a long time before I realized he was impotent.'

She turned to look at me. 'Did you know that, Clem?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I've gathered it by now.'

'I suppose that was what first appealed to him about me. Having someone to cuddle who didn't make any demands on his manhood. And later, when I'd stopped being a child, I'd become a habit and he couldn't do without me. But, of course, it's not healthy for a girl with normal instincts to have them stifled; may spoil her looks for one thing. So when I was just twenty-one he found me the first of a long line of dead-beats to do what he couldn't. His name was Gannelain.'

She stubbed out her cigarette. She looked tired. 'He was one of his stooges. Quite charming and at first I liked him. Court got me to marry him. We were all going to be terribly happy together and Court was going to be a fairy godfather to us, and anyway what else could I do? I was so dependent on him. Cliff Gannelain was a bloody swine. I stuck him for a couple of years and then one night I shot him dead.'

She said it quite flatly. It sounded as though she didn't really care very much. 'Court fixed everything. Gannelain was a pretty loony type and it wasn't very difficult to get it accepted as suicide. There was one man, a C.I.D. sergeant, who had his suspicions—noticed one or two things. But Court took care of him. The detective's name was George Smith.'

I remembered the empty look in the big man's face as he dealt with Charles and his pals. Esther went on, 'It seemed at the time another debt I owed him, although I look at it differently nowadays. But there you are; we've drifted on as



you see us today: Courtney Polaris chivalrously protecting the young widow.'

She smiled wryly. 'I suppose fundamentally our post-war careers haven't been all that different, Clem.'

I lay silent until I began to fear she might think I was angry with her, so I reached out to squeeze her hand again. 'This cuddling you spoke about,' I demanded, 'does that still go on?'

'Yes,' she sighed. 'He likes to maul me about. That's why I'm not keen on seeing him tonight.'

'Well, why the hell haven't you chucked him?' I almost shouted. 'Just slung your hook and gone?'

Her smile this time was bitter. 'Lack of backbone, I suppose. The longer I've been with him, the more dependent I've become. I've known no world but his since the bad time in France. Trying to break away from him on my own would be like diving into an empty swimming-pool. And every time I've found someone I've thought would help me, Court's got rid of him. Yes, there have been other men, you'll have heard about them. I didn't feel about them as I do about you, that's the truth, Clem, I swear; but they weren't just something to pass the time away, like Les. Court got rid of each of them, one way or another. Sometimes he did it quite nicely; when he couldn't manage it like that he just stamped on them. He's cunning and he's unscrupulous and doesn't care how long it takes him to arrange something on which he's determined.'

'I see,' I grunted. 'And one way or another he reckons to get rid of me?'

She looked positively dewy-eyed then began to cry. 'You are someone I can turn to, Clem,' she sobbed, 'and he knows it. He's started on you already.'

'Then he'll have to move faster than he has done,' I snarled, 'because we're getting out of here now.'

Her jaw dropped, she looked radiant one moment, frightened the next. 'How can we? You're injured. You can't leave here in that state.'

'Don't nag,' I ordered. 'Where are my clothes?' I opened the wardrobe and found them for myself.

'Clem, you'll make yourself ill.'

'Look,' I said fiercely, 'in the first place, I'm not such a frail flower as all that. Secondly, if you imagine I'm going to lie up here while Court Polaris fingers you in the conservatory or somewhere you're crackers.'

She didn't protest any further. While I dressed I patrolled up and down the room testing my muscles, rolling my shoulders. I was still sore all over and stiff as a board. Let's hope it would wear off with exercise. It looked as though I could expect plenty of that, anyhow. Taking on Court Polaris would probably prove rather tougher than tackling the Royal Marine Commandos. I looked across at Esther where she stood staring at me.

'Got any money?'

'A little. Quite a lot of jewellery.'

'Good. Bring it all. We'll call by your room on the way out to pick it up. Then we head for London. I know one or two places where we can go to ground for a while.'

'I still think it's crazy.'

'Nothing of the kind. He thinks that for the moment I'm conveniently out of action and that he's got more time than he really has. If we scam now we'll get our kick in first.'

Nobody saw us as we left by the rear and walked over to the garage. Esther normally drove the big Fiat so we took that, two packed suitcases slung in the boot. My spirits rose as we roared down the drive; we were a jump ahead. Now we'd see how easily Mr. Polaris could shape the future in order to fit me into that little niche. At that time I'd no idea how easy it would be.

11

‘HOW DOES Sydney suit you?’ I asked Esther.
‘Sydney who?’

‘Idiot. Sydney, Australia. I saw Brigadier Powell who is now doing very well for himself after being awarded his golden bowler. He was almost incoherent in his haste to offer me a cushy billet as their representative out there.’

‘Yes. Australia sounds nice. I should like that.’ She looked around her with a rueful smile. ‘I don’t want to sound shrewish but a change of scenery will be rather a welcome thing.’

We were in O’Laley’s front room, sitting on the settee of the shabby three-piece suite. It was a small semi-detached house in Streatham, the window looking out on to a street of other semi-detached houses with scraps of garden in front of them. The wallpaper was of an intricate geometric design warped in places by damp patches. A low fire glowed sulkily in the grate with a layer of ashes over the hearth which was surrounded by a heavy brass fender. There was a book-case against one wall filled with several volumes of Chambers’ Encyclopaedia, books with titles like, *Home Rule and After*, *Ireland’s Agony*, *The Great Famine*, and a large number with titles in Erse. There were ashtrays everywhere, all of them full. O’Laley was out in the kitchen taking a Bren gun to pieces prior to sending the bits off by post.

‘Never mind,’ I said, ‘it will take Polaris a hell of a long time to get a lead on us here.’

We grinned at each other. Apart from the surroundings, everything seemed to be going well. Soon after, Esther went upstairs to try and coax enough hot water out of the geyser for a bath and I wandered out into the kitchen. A kettle was boiling its head off on the gas stove while O'Laley, squinting over the smoke of the butt-end stuck between his lips, completed the work of dismantlement.

'The bastard trigger unit', he murmured, 'has now come adrift.'

He was a thin, consumptive-looking man with keen grey eyes, dressed in a cheap grey pin-stripe suit and without a collar. Now and again he had his hair crew-cut but not very often so that at present it stuck straight up for about two inches all over his head, making him look like a worn-out shaving brush. The kitchen was a shambles of plates, tins, oily rags, bottles. Seven tea cups, empty save for the slops, stood on the draining board. They were all his.

'Did you have any luck this morning, Clem?' he enquired. 'Is the old gang going to look after its errant son?'

I sauntered across and turned out the gas. 'That's right. A well-paid sinecure for one of the chaps.' I hadn't mentioned to O'Laley whom I was going to see, or why, but he was rather good at deducing things. Too good for my liking.

'That's fine. I admire the way you English bastards hang together. But it'll be nice to have a sympathizer for the Cause in an influential position.'

'You bomb your own bloody police stations,' I said, leaning against the sink. 'I'm for a quiet life from now on.'

He opened the cupboard over the dresser and began putting the bits of machine gun away amongst the crockery. 'You'll know how it stabs me to say this, Clem,' he said, inserting the breech block into a milk jug, 'but the rent must go up this week. It's not for me I'm asking it, not after all the bottles we've drunk together; but there's a Browning auto-

matic and a case of ammunition to go to our friends on the other side this week and their passage has to be paid. We're not a wealthy organization, Jesus blast it.'

'Oh yeah? What about the big fat cheques these Americans keep sending you from the Bronx?'

'Holy Mary, we see none of that stuff. And they don't back us up over there the way they used to. I sometimes fear the bastards are beginning to *like* the English.'

'O.K. You'll get your dynamite money, don't worry.'

I left him and went back to the front room where I stood looking out of the window. It was time to move on, as soon as I could contact one or two more of my acquaintances from the rough days gone by. O'Laley was nosey and he was soaking us. A small Austin delivery van was parked up the road and I contemplated it thoughtfully, not for the first time. As Esther came back into the room I piled myself into an armchair and asked, 'Tell me, chick, have you formed any odd impressions during the past few days?'

She looked at me with immediate understanding, and with fright. 'Yes, Clem. Just lately I've noticed.'

'An eerie feeling that your footsteps were being dogged?'

She nodded, then said almost pleadingly, 'But it can't be. How could he have found us?'

'Possibly,' I replied, 'he never lost us. He's a very bright boy, we should have remembered that. If he had been expecting us to blow in the way we did and had a man or two ready to tail us, that might account for the van outside. No, don't go near the window.'

'But why? If he knows where we are, why hasn't he done anything about it?'

'Perhaps we can discover that,' I said. 'Wait here.'

I went to the kitchen and called O'Laley. He came with me and I pointed out the van. 'It's been there quite a while. Someone sitting in the back, I fancy.'

'Jesus,' muttered O'Laley in alarm. 'Bloody police.'

'I don't think so. Private enterprise. Could be someone for you, of course; I rather think it's someone for me.'

He squinted up the road again. 'There's one way of finding out. Take him? Looks like a bloody amateur anyway, stuck out there like that.'

'He might be a law-abiding citizen; but we'll soon see. We'll split.'

'Who's going to be the decoy duck?'

'I'd better do that. I'm pretty sure it's me he's after. Got a gun? Something sensible, I mean, not that damn machine gun.'

'Sure.' His eyes flashed sparks as he began to work himself up. 'Hang on a second.'

He fussed purposefully out of the room leaving Esther and me to look at each other wryly. 'We weren't so far ahead of him after all, then,' she remarked.

'There may be nothing to it. Anyhow, we'll see what this gink has to say for himself before we plan our next move. Got a handbag mirror?'

She handed it to me as O'Laley bustled back in. He now had on a dirty trench coat and a big felt hat with a turned-down brim and was flourishing an enormous automatic pistol. 'Lucky I had this thing around,' he said. 'I'll go up the road to the corner. If he follows you, go into the newsagent's there and I'll jump him while he waits. Give me a couple of minutes, then we'll show the dirty English devil.'

He stuffed the pistol into his pocket where it made a great bulge anyone with eyes could spot from a quarter of a mile. I thought of suggesting he should put it in a carrier bag but couldn't be bothered. He left looking as though he were setting out to fight the Black and Tans.

Esther looked pale and strained. 'Mind how you go.'

'Don't worry. If they were planning an assassination they've had plenty of chances already.'

I squeezed her hand and followed in O'Laley's tracks. He had disappeared. Without glancing at the van but with Esther's mirror tucked in the palm of my hand I set off up the road. When I reached the corner I took a look in the mirror. The van had started up and was moving after me.

Turning into the next street, I entered the tobacconist's, bought myself some Senior Service and matches, and glanced at the papers. BOMBS THROWN IN LIVERPOOL STREET FIGHTS, I read and, in a column alongside, *The Jumping General Accuses Whitehall*. So I bought a couple, tucking them in my pocket as I went out. The van was parked on the corner. There was a toot from its horn as I emerged. I walked up to it swiftly, opened the door and got in beside the driver.

He looked a seedy type from W.I., clad in tight overcoat and sweating visibly. O'Laley sat on the floor of the van behind him, the pistol on his knee.

'He was goggling at you so intently,' he remarked, 'I invited him to take a closer look.'

'Start up,' I ordered.

The driver ran his tongue along thick lips. He was a podgy, pimply man. 'You can't get away with this,' he began. '*Start up*,' interrupted O'Laley in blood-chilling tones. The other started up.

We took him back to the house and marched him inside, O'Laley with the gun inside his coat once more. Esther sat by the window smoking a cigarette. I winked at her.

'Now, ye dirty English devil,' O'Laley began in business-like fashion. 'Ye've been following my pal around. Tell me what's the idea before I bash ye're brains out.'

'Now, look 'ere,' remonstrated the newcomer, 'you can't get away with this sort of thing, you know. I'll have the law to you.'

O'Laley grinned then cursed. He was having difficulty in tugging his massive cannon from his pocket. I stood by the window looking on. I thought I could leave a little more of the softening-up process to O'Laley.

'Never mind the blather, you whoring ghett,' he shouted. He had the gun out now and cracked the other across the funny bone with the barrel. 'Answer my question, quick.'

'Cor, you—you wait. I dunno what you're talking about, but you'll wind up in court after this. I've got the address.'

O'Laley levelled the gun and looked as if he meant it. 'There's a quick way of stopping you complaining. Tell me what I want to know or I'll quiet you with this.'

The podgy man sneered. 'Do I look that stupid? You've been watching too many westerns, mate.'

He shouldn't have sneered. It removed my last doubts about him. I wandered across until I stood in front of him.

I fainted with my left hand and, as he brought up his guard, threw him with an ankle throw. As he went down I caught his wrist, twisted, then stood over him, his arm locked rigidly at every joint, bending back his forefinger.

'I shall give you thirty seconds to answer each question,' I said coldly. 'Each time you run over the limit, I'm going to dislocate a finger. Why were you following me? Thirty seconds from now.'

Thirty seconds is quite a long time when someone is bending your finger back as far as it will go. After about a third of the time, he wheezed into the carpet, 'All right, that's enough. Leggo.'

'Never mind the protests. Why were you following me?'

'I was told to.' His voice was muffled by the carpet. 'Had to report on you. See if the girl was still with you.'

'Who gave you the job?'

'Look, you're breaking my finger,' He sounded panicky. 'Lemme up. I'll tell you, just leggo my finger.'

I relaxed the pressure. 'All right. But any clever stuff and you won't get another chance.'

He clambered painfully to his feet. O'Laley, anxious not to be left out of the act, bawled from behind him, 'Come on! Spill it!'

'There's been someone on you all the time. I got the job from Arthur Patch in the Roxy Club, relieving another fellow.' He looked a shade bitter. 'Arthur reckoned he was doing me a favour.'

'You said you had to report. Where and to whom?'

'Back at the Roxy. There's a bloke stopping there; he took any messages.'

'Give him a name.'

'I dunno who he is.' I looked at him and he repeated in a shout, 'I dunno, I tell you. All I know is he calls himself Les. Young, good-looking fellow.'

'O.K.,' I said. 'And your name, squire?'

'Butcher,' he answered sulkily, 'Frank Butcher.'

'Paddy, is there somewhere you can keep Mr. Butcher safe for a spell?'

'Sure there is,' said O'Laley cheerfully. 'He can go in the cupboard under the stairs.'

'Will it hold him?'

'It'll hold him. Especially if I put a shot through the door whenever he starts to kick up a fuss.'

'Fine. Shove him in there.'

'C'man, me boyo,' O'Laley ordered peremptorily, 'out here.'

They marched out to leave Esther and me looking at each other.

'What are you going to do?' she asked, her voice quiet and tense. I scowled out of the window.

'I had an idea that that was the set-up. It wasn't Fletcher's men who fixed the ambush on the building site. I always

thought Phillips was too intelligent to go right in with that bunch. He and Les Moran are both working with Polaris.'

Out in the hall we could hear Mr. Butcher's voice up-raised in indignant protest. 'Ere! What d'you think I am, a bloody rabbit? 'Ow long d'you reckon I'm going to be stuck in here?'

'Shut up', O'Laley commanded remorselessly, 'and get your big feet inside.'

There was a noise of heel stamping on toe and a yelped curse.

'But Les hates Polaris,' protested Esther, 'and after the beating-up he gave him Court's hardly likely to——'

'Whatever the reason, they're together. Les is stupid enough to believe that if he gets me out of the way Polaris will let him have another go at you.'

'Nobody's that stupid,' she said sharply, jerking her head up. 'And I tell you Polaris isn't a man who forgives easily. In any case, he daren't let Les get away with that. If Fletcher's men get the idea they can beat him up any time they're annoyed with him Court will have to write the entire Movement off.'

'That's true,' I nodded. 'But they're up to something and it will be as well to find out what.'

'Clem,' she pleaded, 'you're not going after him? Please leave it alone. Let's just get away from here, to somewhere they don't know about.'

I stuck my hands morosely in my pockets. 'I'm not being chased around the country by that little bastard. And I don't like being in the dark as to what's going on. Getting hold of that slob out there has put us one jump ahead, and I'm going to use it to find out a thing or two. In any case,' I added sourly, 'I owe young Les something.'

'It's not safe, Clem.' She was becoming tearful. 'I'm afraid. Please, can't we just hide until we go to Sydney?'

'Christ, girl,' I cried in exasperation, 'we can't just keep on hiding. It would be the same in Australia. Some time or other they've got to be chilled off, and now, when they're not expecting it, is a better time than most.'

O'Laley came back into the room looking very well content with God. 'That's fixed him. What do we do now, Clem?'

'All you have to do is keep him here for a while. Let him fester until tomorrow morning but make sure he doesn't suffocate in there. Esther and I are going to hand you your dynamite money and move on. This won't be a hideout any longer once that fellow's loose.'

'Where will you go, Clem?'

'Don't ask damn fool questions. I'll contact you. Just do us this one last service. And try not to louse it up.'

'Don't you worry about me,' he said cheerfully, 'I'll tend him as carefully as if he was me own babe in arms.'

We left soon after. The move itself didn't please me very much. O'Laley was greedy and scatty and his house was no dream cottage but at least he had been cheerful and entertaining. The best I could find now at short notice was a fake spiritualist and genuine alcoholic who lived in Hampstead. Here I left Esther, not liking it much.

'Oh, well, Clem,' she remarked with a pale smile on learning our new host's trade, 'at least we'll be able to keep in touch.'

'Cut that out,' I snapped. 'All I'm going to do is swoop on this youngster and chop him down to size. Then I'll disappear into the blue once more. Just don't worry yourself.'

This was easier said than done, however, and she was on the verge of tears again when I left. That didn't put me in the best of moods for my mission. I knew the Roxy, although by name only, a club of sorts in Shepherd's Bush. From what I had heard of it, I fancied the police only left it open because when they wanted to round up suspects it made it much easier to be able to gather them all in together from the Roxy

Club. Evening was closing in by the time I had completed the move to Hampstead and got over to Shepherd's Bush. There was a drizzle and the damp, wintry twilight, the huddled crowds and the glare from street lamps and scruffy shops and milk bars didn't do anything to cheer me up. The Roxy Club was up two flights of bare wooden stairs. It had been opened in the days before cellars became fashionable.

I went up the stairs and in through the baize doors at the top. They didn't bother about a doorman at the Roxy; the boys inside reckoned to be able to take care of gate-crashers. The ones that were in there now gave me a heavy stare as I stood by the door taking the place in, my bandaged left hand hanging at my side. Three nondescripts were sitting at one of the three tables, a couple of teds, not yet lagged often enough to fit into the surroundings, at another and the third was empty. One of the poor girls driven from the streets by the Wolfenden Report was sitting on a stool at the tiny bar and the hard look she gave me showed she was very much off duty. Behind the bar was a short wide man whose chin was just a ripple in his great thick neck. He wore a spotless white shirt and a black bow tie with orange spots. He, too, just gazed at me emptily without moving. Presently I trudged across the few yards that separated us to confront him.

'Arthur Patch?'

'Which Arthur Patch would that be?' he asked in a crumbly voice. 'We got so many of that name in here.'

The crow sitting beside me blew smoke and studied it thoughtfully. One of the teds got up and oozed past me to the massive juke box against the wall. He was looking me up and down all the time he fed coins into the slot and pressed buttons. I propped myself at the end of the bar in the corner and took out my cigarettes.

'All right,' I said, 'I'm not exactly thrilled to be here myself. I'm just doing one of your customers a favour.'

'Oh, yes?' He resumed his impression of a statue, save that his clear grey eyes never wavered from me. The juke box began making the usual frantic noises.

'I've a message from Frank Butcher,' I went on. 'You know, the fat, ugly Frank Butcher.'

The ted had come to lean against the wall just behind me. When I glanced round he was still staring at me, cleaning his finger-nails. I cocked an eyebrow at the man behind the bar and saw expression creep into his face for the first time: a look of cold displeasure.

'You sit down like a good boy,' he said softly to the ted, 'or you get out and stay out.'

The youngster shrugged and shuffled back to his seat. The man in the white shirt picked up a glass and began polishing it irritably. 'Bloody kids. It gets on my wick to watch 'em slouching around trying to look like a lot of bleeding Jesse Jameses.'

'Too much television,' said the woman beside me. 'That's the trouble.' She had a harsh, unmusical voice.

'No doubt, Mavis, no doubt. Been a curse to your business, ain't it?' He switched his attention back to me. 'So you've got a message, eh? And what has dear Frankie to say?'

'Aha,' I said, 'I'd simply love to tell you; but it's for the ears of Another.'

'Arthur Patch, you said. Well, you can tell me. I'm his oldest friend.'

'You misunderstood me. I simply asked for Arthur Patch. I didn't say the message was for him.'

He nodded sagely. The juke box was thundering out a recording of somebody howling into a bucket. 'I see. Suppose you tell me just what the hell you do want?'

'I want a word with Les Moran. He gave Frank a little job to do. You introduced them.'

'Ah.' His face became blanker than ever and he stood for a

while in silence. 'Les Moran. That's the young chap. He ain't here now.'

'I can see that. Where is he?'

'You know him, then?'

'Of course I know him. We're old pals, Les and I.'

He moved his head slightly to indicate a door at the other end of the room. 'Through there and up the stairs. First door on the landing.'

'Thank you,' I said courteously. The three men round the table had stopped bothering about me now, the teds had been put in their place and nobody took any notice as I moved across the dark stale room to the door. I pushed it open carefully and saw a short corridor with a closed door on each side and a staircase at the end. I walked very quietly now with the racket of the juke box behind me and kept a look-out above me as I started up the twisting stairs. There were great patches missing from the plaster and the carpet smelt a hundred years old. On the landing I stood for a while studying the door, a shabby affair with brown paint flaking off and a grubby brass door handle. As I reached out for it I couldn't repress a shiver and wondered how good an electric conductor brass made. No lightning flashed and crackled through me this time, however; the handle turned and I gave it a good shove, swinging the door wide open.

Les was sitting on the other side of the room, facing me. Behind him was a dirty sash window looking out on to a blank brick wall which made the room dull and cold. The wallpaper looked as though it was suffering from some hideous disease, there was more of the miserable brown paint on the woodwork, a woollen cloth of gloomy red covered the table beside him with a glass, a half-pint whisky bottle and an empty milk bottle standing upon it. The floor was covered with a grim, green, moth-eaten linoleum, all bumps and wrinkles. There was another door in the wall on my left.

I stepped swiftly to one side as I crossed the threshold and closed the door. Nobody was lurking behind it. Les sat there in a tattered basket chair staring at me and saying nothing. He was still dressed as he had been on the last occasion when we met and his stubble was in about the same condition. I noticed that he had the forefinger of his left hand clasped inside his right, twisting it nervously back and forth, and his forehead glistened in the thin, sad light of the unshaded sixty-watt bulb. His face was as white as a ghost's, the dark eyes burning out of it without really seeming to take me in.

I stayed where I was, studying him. The door on my left was slightly ajar but as it opened into the other room and the hinges were on the post farthest from me I couldn't see beyond it. I didn't greatly care for that.

'Hullo, Les my boy,' I almost whispered. 'You don't look too good.' Cautiously I edged my way along the left-hand wall, stalking him, content to take my time and also to satisfy myself about that uncomfortable door. Something lay on the floor between us: a big flick-knife, open, the blade gleaming with sinister placidity. From downstairs came the hammering and howling of the juke box, muffled by the floorboards.

I eyed the knife pensively. Was I supposed to stoop and pick it up? Not a good idea, I decided. Les himself seemed in bad shape. I could see the beads of sweat quite clearly now, swelling on his face and clinging to his beard. But now his eyes came to sudden life and his mouth twisted into the same bitter sneer it had worn that night in the bungalow.

'Hullo, buddy boy.' His voice was low and hoarse. 'How did the shock treatment suit you?'

'You'll find out,' I said coldly and took another step forward.

Les suddenly came up on to his feet and as he did so a change came over his face. It crumpled up, the mouth con-

torted and gaping in a sob, his eyes wide and tears springing from them. He flung up his arms.

'Naw,' he bawled like a frightened adolescent. 'Plee-ase, naw-haw-haw. Aarrgh, DON'T.'

But he wasn't blubbering at me. His terrified eyes were fixed on the open door through which I couldn't see.

Two vicious bangs blended into one, bouncing off the walls into a roar, and the room seemed to fill at once with the stink of cordite. I flattened myself against the wall, crouching, ready to spring at anything that showed itself around the doorjamb. Les reeled backwards clutching his chest and the hands he pressed against his jacket were red. The table rocked as he hit it and tumbled on to its side. It didn't make half so heavy a bump as Les as he landed beside it.

I could still hear the juke box down below. There was no other sound; in the next room, nothing moved. My eyelids were practically folded back inside my head, so intently did I watch the doorpost behind which stood the killer with a gun. Surely he didn't intend simply staying there? Another way out. Then, abruptly I got the complete picture and snaked for the door. With upraised forearm I slammed it back but it went a bare six inches then stopped with a thud. On the other side I could see a bed drawn across it as a barricade; on there the killer must have been standing as I came in. Reckless now, I put my shoulder to the door and shoved it open. The room was dark but there, as I had guessed, was an open window. Jumping on to and over the bed I made for it and peered outside. A fire escape, leading both up and down. Above, the roof; below, a narrow canyon of shadows; which way had he gone?

There were noises in the room next door, an ejaculation. My heart in my mouth, I got a foot up on to the windowsill as somebody came through the door, moving fast. Clutching the sides of the window I was about to pull myself through

I glanced vacantly at him then back to the knife on the floor. Whoever it was had arranged the scene carefully. He must have kept a look-out for me from the time Frank Butcher had been sent off to get himself caught and feed me the story that had brought me here. Les had probably thought it was a straightforward ambush with the object of beating my head in; only when the killer had placed him in his chair, positioned himself and put the gun on him did he begin to catch on. He had probably been sitting there sweating it out from the time I entered the Roxy. I looked down at his face. The electric shock and the cement mixer were paid for.

The man in the Italian suit was looking at him as well. 'Who was he, Arthur? He's not a local.'

'Dunno,' said Arthur, his voice as flat as ever. I squinted at his big stomach beside my shoulder.

'You'd better practise saying that. Because the bulls were after him. I'm surprised they hadn't looked here before.'

He didn't bother to reply and I reflected grimly on what I had just said. The police had been after him all right: for the spectacular roughing-up he had administered to me. There was my motive—apart from Esther. As soon as her name slipped into my head I quickly snapped it back in its cupboard. My eyes were drawn again to the flick-knife. Knives were things I knew something about. If I could get my hands on it I might have a chance.

'What happened to the gun?' the man at my other shoulder asked suddenly.

'He'll have slung it through the window,' said Arthur. 'They'll soon find it. That's their worry, anyway. We've done enough of their job for them tonight.'

Once more the door opened, this time to admit two uniformed squad car men. They looked around them, settled their eyes coldly on me for a long spell then the leader, a big, rugged fellow, nodded to Patch.

'Evening, Arthur. What you got here?'

'That's for the judge to decide. I wouldn't want to prejudice him in any way. This bloke we've got here comes into the club and asks to see our late lamented friend on the floor, who's been stopping here a couple of days. Said he had a message. I sends him up, next thing I hear is a damn great bang. So I pelts up the stairs and finds that, laid out same as he is now. I goes into the bedroom and there's this fellow trying to get away out of the window.'

'Upon which, officah,' put in the little Cockney, 'we epprehended him.'

The other policeman, a lot younger than the first, had his notebook out. 'Been staying here, had he, Arthur?' he asked cheerfully. 'What had he done?'

'I wouldn't know,' said Arthur. 'Perhaps he liked it here.'

'Don't look like it now,' commented the first policeman. He eyed me thoughtfully and glanced from me to the knife at his feet. 'Tried to stick you with this, did he, chum?'

'No,' I answered. Several more men, in plain clothes, came into the room. Only one of them bothered to look at me while the others bustled about. He wore a tweed overcoat and curly-brimmed hat with a small sandy moustache. He studied me while he listened to the squad car men, then turned to one of his companions.

'Take a constable and go down and look for the gun.'

After this, he listened to Arthur Patch's story. At the end of it he gave him a square, cool stare. 'That was very brave of you, Arthur. You might have got yourself killed, dashing in like that.'

'That's right, Inspector,' said Arthur with an ingratiating smile, 'do you think I'll get the George Medal?'

The inspector turned away from him to join the couple working on the body. After standing with his hands in his pockets watching them for a while, he squatted down with

them himself, studying what was left of Les with interest. I heard one of the other men say, 'Killed outright. Pretty good shooting, if it was intentional. Thirty-eight, I should say. Sort of made sure of it.'

The inspector pointed to something, leaned forward and sniffed. 'Make a note of that. It might be interesting.' The others sniffed with him then looked at each other.

'Peed himself?'

'Looks like it.' He stood up and strolled into the bedroom. The squad-car men, with a couple of uniformed constables who had now joined them, stood around listlessly while the experts got on with it. The cockney lit another Woodbine and asked one of the uniformed men, 'Sure you wouldn't like me to make a statement?'

A plain-clothes man came over to me with a notebook. 'Can I have your name, please?'

I gave it him. I knew they would get it soon, anyway. It would be part of the plan. They would get it all, not just the trouble with Les but my past record, the wartime violence, the long years as a down and out. I would be just the type for a killing like this.

'Address?'

'No fixed abode.' He wrote it down conscientiously.

'Occupation?'

'Unemployed.'

'Thanks very much.' He moved off, pleased at having got the paper work tidied up. As the inspector returned from the bedroom the man he sent out to look for the gun came back.

'Here it is, sir. In the alley directly below.'

The inspector took the pistol from him in the handkerchief in which it was wrapped and at last turned his attention to me. 'You don't have to say anything if you don't want to. But if you want to explain now, before we move on to the station, let's hear it.' His frosty eyes bored down at me,

'The dead man's name is Les Moran,' I said. 'I came up here to see him as the man said. He was sitting in this chair, which is placed where it can be seen from inside the bedroom when the door is slightly ajar. The killer was in there, perched on the bed, which he had pushed across the doorway to hinder anyone who chased him when he made his getaway. When I came in, Les was looking terrified; because he'd realized that the other man couldn't see me, but had arranged him so as to make a perfect target. Here, see for yourself.'

As I spoke I got up from the chair, slammed the inspector on the bicep and took the gun from his numbed fingers. Before anyone had realized properly what was happening, save that I had somehow got a gun in my fist, I was across by the bedroom door, covering them with the automatic, my eyes wide and my lips rolled back from my teeth. Policemen pride themselves on coping with people with firearms; I knew that everything depended on looking as unbalanced as possible so as to startle them into making the mistake of handling me carefully instead of rushing me at once, which, in view of their numbers, was the sensible thing to do. For the essential moment it worked; they all stood gaping at me as I slipped through the bedroom door and slammed it shut. As it swung to I fired downwards through it just to give them food for thought. Then I was across the room and diving, this time, through the still open window on to the fire escape beyond.

I went down the first flight of the iron steps in one jump and a slither, with deadly cold in my heart. Above me, someone was leaning out of a window and blowing a whistle like mad. I plunged down the next flight, slipping on one step to take the skin off the back of my ankle, leaping the bottom half. All it needed now was a broken or twisted ankle. There was darkness below me but away at one end of the alley I

was aware of street lights and traffic. That was the way they would come. There was one more flight to go. There was a thundering of feet on the iron stairs above me and already I could hear the nails of boots hammering down the alley from the lighted end. I swung myself over the rail, hung down from one hand and felt agony shoot through me. I still had the pistol grasped in my right hand and had unthinkingly swung from the burned left. I dropped to the paving-stones below, landed on all fours and saw a helmeted figure charging down on me. I came up into a compact crouch behind the gun and the oncoming policeman, seeing the muzzle staring at his middle, tried to pull up short; but his iron-shod feet skidded on the concrete and he tottered with outflung arms trying to keep his balance. I had already pushed the catch over to safety; now, with a rush, I butted him in the stomach, hacked his shin with the barrel and brought my head up beneath his jaw. He went flat on his back and I turned and ran, half-hearing the hurrying steps ominously close on the fire escape.

It could have been a cul-de-sac but I was lucky. The alley opened on a dark lane running between the brick walls of buildings on one side, a wooden fence on the other; but, away at the far end I could see the glimmer of the open street. That wasn't so good; I would run straight into them, but my pursuers had already turned into the lane behind me and there wasn't much I could do to get out of it.

I was still lucky, however. At one point a few planks had been knocked out of the fence and without hesitation I ducked and squeezed through the narrow gap. There was one panic-stricken moment when it seemed as though it wasn't going to be wide enough; but I wrenched myself frantically through and got clear with a rip of tearing cloth. It was a yard of some sort. I started through it and saw a white figure looming in front and above me with something in its upraised hand. I had instinctively flinched away before I realized it

was a graveyard angel; there were funerary memorials all round me. Very appropriate, I thought wryly; there didn't seem to be a way out.

There was a noise at the fence where they were squeezing through the gap I had used. The double gates, as was to be expected, were padlocked; the fence was slightly taller than I was. They were already moving about amongst the tombstones but fortunately it was dark. Then a torch began to probe about, picking out patches of white stone and surrounding blackness. It wouldn't be long before they spotted me.

Crouching behind a marble slab I saw, at the end of the yard opposite the gates, a lean-to shelter with a neat rank of crosses beneath it. The roof was level with the top of the fence. I left my hiding place and ran at top speed for one end of it. A shout went up and I was vaguely aware of a figure dashing across to cut me off. The fence immediately beside the lean-to came closer and closer and as I reached it, using the impetus of my charge, I ran straight up it. For a split second I was leaning outwards from the top of the fence with the roof beside me; and in that moment, before I could tumble back, I slammed my arm down on it, jerked my spine convulsively and rolled myself on top of it. At my age and in my condition, not a bad trick and I still had the gun clutched in my hand. That was just as well because as I clambered up a bull, climbing up the fence, clutched at my ankle. I slammed the gun barrel down on his fingers and leaped over the other side of the fence.

That was nearly my undoing, for on the other side I simply fell into space. It came as such a shock that when I finally hit the side of the steeply shelving slope I was completely unprepared for it, took a nasty jar and then tumbled over and over to the bottom, where I lay with the breath knocked out of me. Whistles were going above me, however,

and, breath or no breath, I had to keep going. I was in a railway cutting. I had best get over the lines lest someone should drop down the bank to head me off. The live rail seemed terribly high and as I stepped gingerly over the first I heard the groaning howl of an approaching train.

My legs felt as though anvils were chained to each of them. To go back would take as long as to go forward so I walked on carefully, lifting my feet high over each of the wet, glinting lines, the gravel treacherous to my tread. Turning my head I saw the train, its code number mournfully luminous, the motorman's head and shoulders visible through the window. The next live rail was in front of me, the track was shuddering with the weight of the train. I raised my knee, teeth clenched, and stretched out my foot, placed it firmly on the far side and drew the rest of my body after it. Then I flung myself against the bank and the train roared past, the gust of angry air escorting it whipping at my clothes. Then I began to run along the side of the track.

It was painful going now, my heart was hammering inside my chest and my muscles felt sluggish. To try climbing the high bank above me would have been asking for it; I had to find an easier way. Looking over my shoulder I saw the remorseless figures coming after me still. I could only hope they felt as bushed as I did. At the top of the cutting on the far side I saw the backs of houses, old, tall places with lights glowing from many-coloured curtained windows within which they were sitting around the television.

The cutting came to an end quite abruptly and I found myself on a bridge. Below was a street, a section of the endless miles of small brick houses with stucco around the doorways and frosted glass in the doors and low brick walls and threadbare hedges in front of them amongst which London was submerged around the turn of the century. Each street lamp burned in a wet aureola and there were a couple of

parked cars but I couldn't see anyone about. I made heavy weather of climbing the fence and clambering down the narrow pathway, littered with tin cans and newspaper, between the brickwork of the bridge and the wall of the first house but once down on the pavement I somehow found a reserve of energy to put on a spurt.

Rounding the corner at the end of the street I saw a squad car coming towards me. It was to be expected, of course. They would have known where to greet me as I emerged from the railway cutting. At the same time I heard the ring of heavy boots on the pavement down the street behind me. I halted, panting for breath. At least I had given them a run for their money. Perhaps they would like me for that.

There was another alley, a patch of darkness between two sets of the brick boxes. I scuttled into it without much hope and heard a dog start barking somewhere. For one last stretch I sprinted like an Olympic runner, head back, mouth straining, between silent back gardens. I reached one which was short, with the kitchen door not far away and a couple of outhouses built on. A glance over my shoulder showed that the coppers had not yet got into the alley; so with a last effort I vaulted the fence and made for the house. There was a light in the window, but that couldn't be helped. I had a vague impression of scruffy flower beds, a tin bath hanging on a wall with a mangle propped beneath it, then I had tried the back door and found it unlocked. Next moment I was inside with the door shut between me and the hastening, searching figures in pursuit. A damp roller towel brushed my face, there was a smell of soap powder and tea, and the place was in darkness save for a light shining under the door from the next room. In there everything seemed too quiet. They must have heard me.

So, with the automatic held purposefully, low down, I opened the door and went in, closing it behind me.

‘Don’t make a noise, and don’t move,’ I said, ‘and you won’t have anything to worry about. Just behave nicely.’

I felt a bloody fool. The room’s only occupant was a girl, a youngster of fifteen or sixteen. She had been doing something to her hair, apparently, and was in a skirt and brassiere. She stood with her arms up, hands in her hair, staring at me. I stared back, propped against the wall, breathing hard with my mouth open, hugging my agonized middle with one hand, pointing the gun vaguely in her direction with the other. We seemed to stay like that for a long time while I listened for sounds of pursuit.

13

‘**E**RE,’ GASPED the girl at length. ‘What’s the big idea?’ I managed a painful grin. ‘Long story. Where are the others?’ I didn’t speak above a whisper; I couldn’t have done, anyway.

‘What others?’

‘The family. Ma and Pa.’

‘Me mum’s gone out. Me dad’s in Hong Kong—so he says, anyway.’

I gestured with the pistol towards the door leading to the front of the house. ‘Let’s just make sure, shall we?’

Her eyes grew wider. This was just like the real thing as she had seen it so often on the films. She was on the thin side, with small breasts and blue eyes and a prettyish shopgirl face. She recalled abruptly that she wasn’t dressed and snatched up a jumper from the armchair behind her with a flash of indignation. ‘Busting in here. Whose house d’you think this is?’

‘Come on,’ I ordered again. ‘Show me round.’

Glancing with thrilled curiosity at the gun, she went ahead of me into the hall. The rest of the place was in darkness and I forbade her to turn any lights on. A brief tour of the poky, close-smelling dwelling satisfied me that we were alone and we returned to the living-room.

On the way, however, I risked a peep through the front room window. There were now two cars pulled up at the end of the street with headlights full on and peak-capped men

standing beside them. Back in the living-room, I switched on the radio.

'Make yourself at home, do,' urged the kiddy haughtily. I grinned at her.

'How about a cup of tea? All that running's made me thirsty.'

She looked at me uncertainly. The radio played sober, nineteen-thirty-style dance music. 'Who's after you? What you done?'

'The police are after me; and I haven't done anything. Well'—I had a hunch that I'd do better not to appear too law-abiding in her eyes—'nothing very much. Let's have this tea and perhaps I'll tell you about it.'

She opened the kitchen door. 'How d'you know I shan't make a dash for it and scream for help?'

'Ah,' I shrugged. 'You wouldn't do a thing like that.' I didn't bother to mention that the door was now locked and I had the key in my pocket.

'Ere,' she called, 'they aren't half after you, too. There's all lights out in the alley.'

Standing by the kitchen door I saw that the room was now quite clearly illuminated by the glare outside. They must have a car pointed down the alley with its headlights on.

'Ere!' cried the girl excitedly, 'they're looking in all the gardens. I can see two of them in Mrs. Cook's with torches.'

'Draw the curtain,' I said. She did as she was told and lit the gas under the kettle.

'You know what'll be the next thing, don't you? They'll be knocking at doors and looking in the houses.'

I leaned against the doorpost and offered her my cigarette packet. 'Smoke?'

'Thanks. Don't mind if I do.' As I held the match for her she gave me a sultry glance from under her lashes. I endeavoured to look tight-lipped and virile.

'What's your name?' I asked.

'Kathy.'

'O.K., Kathy.' I slid the gun into my pocket, giving it a significant pat. 'I'm Clem. Maybe you'll see some fireworks shortly. It's been nice meeting you, anyway.'

Her scornful grin warned me not to lay it on too thick. 'Maybe I could get rid of 'em,' she remarked indifferently. 'I don't know.'

'Maybe you just won't answer the door,' I said. Her grin became a smirk of impudent satisfaction.

'They'll have seen the light by now.'

'Too bad.'

'What are they after you for, Clem?' she enquired judicially.

'Killing someone.'

I saw her swallow and she plucked with her thin, pale fingers at her jumper. After a moment, without looking at me, she asked, 'What—who was it? How did it happen?' A slight hoarseness had crept into her voice and she swung wide blue eyes on to me in sudden alarm. 'It wasn't a woman?'

Master of the situation once more, I gave her a reassuring grin. 'No, it wasn't. I'm not a sex killer, young Kathy, don't worry. And just between you and me I didn't kill this fellow anyway. But the rozzers out there won't believe that.'

'You mean—a frame-up, or something?' she demanded, thrilled beyond belief. I showed my teeth through a cloud of cigarette smoke, looking, I hoped, devilish brave.

'Exactly that. But not to worry. Let's have this tea before they get here.'

There was someone outside in the garden. I put a warning finger to my lips and slid my hand with well-contrived casualness down to the gun in my pocket. At the same moment there was a heavy knock at the front door.

Kathy came swiftly to me, took me by the arm and

pushed me through the living-room into the hall. 'Upstairs, quick,' she hissed in an excited whisper. We went up and into the front bedroom, palely lighted by the street lamp outside. There was a big double bed covered by a fluffy, greenish bedspread, two china dogs and a photograph on the mantelpiece; more important, a built-in wardrobe in one corner. Kathy opened the door.

'Don't get worried, I'm going to lock you in and hang on to the key. It'll be all right, you see.'

For a moment I hesitated. I could be handing myself over nicely packaged; but in the end I did as she said. The door closed on me and the lock clicked. I could almost sympathize now with Frank Butcher. A shelf at the top of the cupboard didn't leave me room to stand upright; coats and dresses were draped over me and there were shoes on trees all around my feet so that I didn't dare move for fear of kicking one of them over. From downstairs I could hear nothing but the faintest murmur of voices, except that Kathy's voice rose for a moment about somebody, 'Mucking about in the back yard.' With a kid like her anything could happen: she could get frightened again; she might become bored with her present role and decide that it would be more romantic to feature as the cool-headed heroine who captured an armed killer on the run. Worse, she might suffer an attack of common sense.

It was hot and the air was thick. There were moth balls in there, too. I was sweating hard and began to fall prey to doubts about the oxygen supply. It felt as though I had been in there half an hour already.

Feet clumped on the stairs outside, shuffled about, came into the bedroom. A man's voice was explaining with kindly reassurance, 'We'll just make sure, see, that he hasn't slipped in, then you won't need to worry.' The door of the wardrobe jerked. Kathy's voice said, 'That's locked. Me mum keeps the

key.' She gave a shy little giggle and added, 'She don't like me trying on her dresses.'

As they went away I pulled an approving face to myself. Kathy was a girl who showed promise. The front door banged and presently the key turned in the lock to release me. She stood there with one hand on her hip, poised and pleased with herself.

'All right?'

'Phew,' I gasped, 'I should be moth-proof for ages after that. Now: that cup of tea.'

She pouted. 'Thanks very much. It was a pleasure, I'm sure.'

At the bedroom door I turned and laughed. 'You were first-rate, kiddo. You ought to be on the stage.'

Back downstairs I sat gratefully in the armchair with a cup of strong, sweet tea. It was a very small room furnished in the fashion of the affluent-society working class; a highly-polished table and chairs, with a fringed cloth on the table, two heavy armchairs and a contemporary-style easy-chair in three colours with wooden arms; television set in one corner, a glass-fronted cocktail cabinet in another; a statuette of a near-naked dancing girl on the mantelpiece and on the wall a polished black imitation African mask. Papers were scattered over one of the armchairs: *Reveille*, *Tit-Bits*, *TV Times*, a strip comic called *Opal*. I seemed to be a world away from Esther and Long Hall. Kathy came back into the room.

'They're still there,' she reported. 'More than ever of 'em now. If you ask me, they ain't going away for a while, either. They'll be up on the roofs next.'

'What time will your mother be back?' She jerked her head with an impatient grimace.

'She's out dancing. Won't be home for hours yet. You're all right here, don't you worry.'

I couldn't help smiling at the comforting way in which she spoke. 'Tell me, Kathy,' I said to her quite earnestly. 'Hasn't it struck you that you run quite a risk in teaming up with a man whom you know nothing about except that the police are in full cry after him? Has no one ever explained to you that it's a citizen's duty to help to maintain the law?'

She laughed uncertainly, not sure whether I was joking or not. Deciding that I wasn't, she sniffed. 'All the police ever do is shove you around. And I'm not a citizen, mister, I'm a teenager. It's another name for juvenile delinquent.' She looked sulky. 'Take that pair just now. "You won't mind if we just take a look to make sure, will you?" All the same if I had minded. Barged in same as what you did, more or less. And they ain't supposed to, are they, not without a search warrant?'

'And suppose they find out you had me tucked away here?'

'Ooh, but I'm going to *tell* them,' she said, surprised. 'Soon as you're safely gone and I know they can't catch up with you. I shall say you forced me to hide you at gun point. It'll be in the papers: *Teenage girl's night of terror!*' Her eyes shone ecstatically. 'Me picture and all, shouldn't be surprised. Might even get on telly.'

I grinned wryly. 'I bet you'll make a good job of it, too. It seems I'm going to be a pretty fearsome type by the time you're through.'

'Oh, I shan't say anything *nasty*,' she reassured me quickly, 'like making out you tried it on, or anything. Cor.' She giggled to herself. 'Shouldn't never hear the last of it from the boys down the club if I said anything like that.'

'That's nice to know. And now we must give some thought to the question of exactly how I'm to get away from here so that you can make a start on the reporters. Because I've a shrewd idea those babies won't be gone by the time your mother comes in. They're still pretty certain I'm somewhere

in the district; and they'll keep a sharp look-out, just to make sure, in any case.'

'You can stop all night in the little room upstairs. Me mum won't dream of looking in there, there's only junk in it anyway. And in the morning she goes out to work before me. After she's gone, I'll bring you up a nice cup of tea and some breakfast and then you can walk along to the bus stop with me. That'll fool 'em, because they'll be watching for a man on his own, especially if you take that bandage off your hand. What you done to it?'

'I got a nasty burn,' I said. Kathy's plan had a lot to be said for it; I could certainly do worse. She clinched the matter for me when she came running once more from her post in the front room looking a little pale.

'Ere! They got *dogs* out there now!'

It looked as though, far from easing off, they were sealing the area more tightly than ever. I didn't have much alternative.

So we drank some more tea and Kathy made me some tinned meat sandwiches. Kathy's next step, of course, once we had settled down, was to seek to learn all about the killing but I was able to suppress her by assuming a suitable poker face and answering in monosyllables.

I couldn't help saying at one point, 'Ever hear of Courtney Polaris?'

'Where's that?'

'He, not that. He's the man behind it all. Tell them that on your television interview.'

Later, when I had taken cover in the small room upstairs, I gave more thought to Mr. Polaris. It was plain now who had sent the police to the building site. If Les had killed me there, he would have been taken for it; and, arriving in time to prevent that, they had preserved me for Polaris to use in his present scheme. Fletcher's men would know now what the score was. I wondered what they and the General himself

thought about it. I didn't suspect any of them of the killing; Polaris was working privately and it wasn't difficult to put a likely name to his gunman. What to do about it was the problem.

I listened anxiously to footsteps and bumps outside the door, noises made by Kathy's unseen mother, running water and a slammed door, the plug being pulled in the lavatory. The small room was in the front, next to her bedroom, and for what seemed ages I could hear little noises from beyond the wall as the dancing matron prepared herself for slumber. At last there was a creaking of bedsprings and a click as the light was switched out and I was able to give myself up to my watch on the street outside and my own thoughts. I didn't dare smoke in case some sharp-eyed and bright policeman should spot the faint rhythmic glow and put two and two together. The street looked empty for the moment with the lamp-light glistening on the pavements; but even as I looked two helmeted figures came strolling thoughtfully past with an Alsatian padding beside them.

Court Polaris was perhaps sitting comfortably in an arm-chair in front of the fire, a drink in his hand and well-being in his heart. But, I thought with sudden, savage pride, his plan had misfired slightly. I wasn't under lock and key as he had intended, charged with murder or manslaughter; I was still on the loose and before they got me I'd wipe the smile from his face.

Then my mind went back to Esther and I finally recognized that I had got over Anna. What had happened all those years ago in Yugoslavia was still part of me; but it was no longer now a stone inside my chest. I had recovered at last from one loss, it seemed; only to lay myself wide open to another. I didn't want to lose Esther; whether I fixed Polaris or not, I didn't want to be locked up in prison until I emerged an old man to find her gone.

There was a bed in the room although it wasn't made up. Tomorrow looked like being a hard day. Very carefully, so as not to make the slightest sound, I eased myself on to it and lay there on my back, staring emptily at the window.

Probably I slept for a few hours although I was still in the same position, staring before me, when it began to grow light. I lay without moving as the day trickled greyly through the damp window, heard the alarm clock go off in the next room. Presently the woman in there began to bestir herself. Instead of bumping about now, she flipped and flopped and her voice when she called, 'Kath,' was a croak. For another hour or more I listened to the morning noises until the front door slammed and I heard footsteps going away down the street. Almost at once my door opened and Kathy came in.

'She's gone,' she announced. 'Didn't suspect a thing. Hope you didn't feel nervous during the night. Weren't cold, were you?'

She had dressed herself to do justice to the occasion with stiletto heels and a lot of nylon lace under her balloon skirt. Carefully and correctly made up she looked as though she could have been nineteen or twenty. I sat on the edge of the bed, gave her an up and down look and grinned. 'You'll look splendid on that television screen.'

'You can go and make yourself look tidy in the bathroom. I'm frying some eggs and bacon. Don't be long or you'll make me late for work.'

In the bathroom I washed, gave up the idea of a shave for the time being but made myself as respectable as possible. Kathy had mended the tear in my coat the previous evening. Now I unwound the bandage from my hand and surveyed the great patch of raw flesh underneath. It had been badly treated the night before, but looked healthy enough. I wondered how it would feel inside a glove.

Downstairs, while I ate hurriedly, Kathy produced an old

plastic document case. 'This is mum's but I can put it back before she finds out. Slip it under your arm, then you'll look as if you're on your way to the office.'

'You're starting to worry me, Kathy,' I observed. 'You aren't one of these girl bandits we're always reading about, are you, by any chance?'

'Daft,' she giggled. 'Now: it's time to go. Ready?'

'Got any shoe polish? I ought to give my shoes a shine.'

'Oh, yes, but do hurry up. You'll make me miss that bus.'

She was bubbling with excitement as we opened the front door. Looking at her I decided that was a good thing. It made her look happy and quite pretty, the last person one would imagine to be walking in company with a hunted murderer. So I gave her a wink and led the way down the step and out of the front gate on to the pavement. It was simply an English morning street, fresh and watery, with a tradesman's van near one end, a woman shaking a rug from her door, three or four characters pelting along with glances at their wrist watches as they made for buses and trains. We walked as briskly as the rest.

'Think I ought to take your arm?' asked Kathy. I shook my head.

'I'm too old for you, it would attract attention. Now that we're out, I'm just a neighbour going the same way. Talk!'

We had turned the corner into another road, identical save that there was a constable half-way along it. As we neared him I observed two more at the junction at the far end. 'What shall I talk about?' demanded Kathy suddenly at a loss.

'Anything. What does your mother do for a living?'

'She works in a dry cleaners. Ooh, Clem, I'm nervous all of a sudden.'

'Idiot. Don't use that name. What do you do?'

We were almost on top of the policeman. I jerked up my

arm to consult my watch in the approved fashion, realized I was flourishing my burn because I hadn't had my glove with me to cover it. 'We're going to be late, you know,' I said gaily.

He glanced at us briefly as we went past. I hoped these were all extra men drafted in, that they didn't patrol a regular beat here. If they did they might be able to spot strangers. But the next two took no notice of us either, and soon after that we were in a main street filled with hurrying people and long bus queues. We tagged on the end of one of the latter and more people formed up behind us. I wondered suddenly how many of them knew Kathy.

'Bit of excitement last night,' said someone behind me.

'They were looking for a bloke. Jim had 'em in his house. Came knocking at the door, went all over the place. Dangerous, so they said.'

'Bit of a bugger, ain't it, when you can't feel safe behind your own front door? I know what I'd do with those people if I had my way. Drowning's too good for 'em.'

A woman standing in front of us turned round and smiled. 'Morning, Kathy.'

'Morning, Mrs. Goodchild.'

I felt her glance at me inquisitively before she turned away again, but stared straight ahead. There was a police car about a hundred yards away, crawling towards us along the kerb. Amongst the passers-by I glimpsed two uniformed men accompanying it along the pavement.

'Here it comes,' said Kathy. The woman, hearing her speak, turned and glanced at me again. A bus was inching its way towards us, stuck behind the police car. It was time to make a decision. Traffic was thick in the road; and on the other side I saw yet another pair of constables standing in a doorway. I strove to fight down the feeling that the rest of the queue was watching me.

The bus suddenly pulled out from behind the crawling car and roared irately down on us. It stopped with a jerk and people began shuffling forward. I could see that it was already fairly full and there was a long way to go. The car was hidden by the back of the bus, but the two men with it were now in full view. The queue came to a halt and I felt sweat on the back of my neck. I should have to break away and chance it.

‘Come on,’ urged Kathy. ‘There’s still room.’

People were already slipping past us from behind and I realized that those still in front didn’t want this one. Hastily I plunged forward with Kathy in my wake and as we got on to the platform the conductor put out an arm. ‘That’s the lot, thank you.’

But his arm was behind us, barring those who tried to follow. We were on. Kathy sparkled at me and gave a covert thumbs-up sign.

We stood side by side in the gangway while the bus progressed in a series of leaps and lurches. ‘Where do you want to go?’ I asked her.

‘Marble Arch, please.’ She spoke in a small voice and I saw her glance up at me from time to time with great eyes from which the liveliness had all at once fled. When I grinned at her she had to make an effort to smile. It was time to be off, I decided, before the agony of parting became too much for her.

The bus turned into the Edgware Road and crawled to a halt at another set of traffic lights. I squeezed her hand. ‘I’ll look you up when it’s all over—and I’ll watch out for you on TV. Cheerio, Kathy. Thank you a lot.’

With that I stepped to the platform and off the bus into the road. The conductor remarked perfunctorily, ‘Mind the lights.’ I didn’t look round as I strode away.

I turned into the Edgware Road Underground Station and

rode by tube back to Hampstead, in a fever of impatience now that the tension of the escape was relaxed. The past night must have been a bigger agony for Esther than it had been for me. But as I approached the house where our temporary host had his flat I slowed up and went carefully. The affair at the Roxy would have been in the morning papers and mine would have been the name of the man the police were anxious to interview. I couldn't feel certain as to what action Peter Greatheart would have felt called upon to take after reading about it.

Looking down the road I couldn't see any sign of a watch on the place. Playing safe, however, I turned off and went round to the back, keeping my eyes peeled, ready to duck and run at a moment's notice. Everything seemed quite normal. So eventually I crossed the yard and went in at the basement stairs where a fat woman with her hair in curlers poked her head out at me and said something in English so bad that I couldn't understand it. I bade her a courteous 'Good morning' and continued upstairs.

Nobody was about. I got to Peter's door and leaned on the bell push, keeping an eye on the stairs the while. He was a long time in answering but at length I heard a bolt being drawn. Then his head was pushed around the door, a pair of enormous thick-lensed spectacles over a black moustache and surmounted by a bald dome.

'Oh, my godfathers, you've come back,' he chattered, 'I was afraid you'd come back. Now, this isn't fair, Clem, this really isn't fair.'

I bumped against the door with my shoulder and slid inside. The tiny hallway was filled with darkness and whisky fumes. I pushed on inside with Peter trailing woefully in my wake. Most of the flat was one big studio with a lot of heavy curtaining, a large round table of polished mahogany on which there now stood a half-empty whisky bottle and a

glass, a bookcase full of immense black-bound books and an irritating smell of cheap incense. The room's only occupant was a fat and slothful doctored cat.

'You know I'm always anxious to help a pal when he needs it, Clem,' twittered Peter Greatheart behind me. 'But it's asking too much to expect to make this placid sanctum a base for blood-thirsty gang warfare. For one thing, it upsets the reverberations; and apart from that, supposing the police found you here?'

A morning paper and an extremely early evening edition lay on the floor. 'You've been reading about poor old Les Moran. Heard from him yet?' I asked heartlessly. 'Where's Esther?'

'Clem, don't make matters worse by speaking so flippantly of one whom you yourself have brutally ushered before his time across to the other side. The lady, your companion, has already left. Wherever she is, I am sure she must be suitably horrified to learn the tragic news. Now, Clem——'

'*What?*' I yelled. 'What did you say?' My arm shot out to seize him by his collar and jerk him almost off his feet. 'She's gone?'

He spluttered at me an alcohol-laden spray and plucked with ineffective fingers at my fist. 'Clem, please. Violence solves nothing. Please put me down.'

I let my arm drop heavily back to my side. 'When did she go?'

'One moment, Clem, please.' He hurried unsteadily to the bottle, poured himself a stiff one and knocked it back. 'I have a very sensitive nature, Clem. That sort of thing rattles me.'

'I'll rattle you, all right, if you don't answer my question. When did she go?'

'When it grew late last night and you failed to return she grew very agitated. Finally she went out. She was away most of the night. Very early this morning she came in,

packed her things and went away again.' He shook his head with a grave glance at the carpet, like a funereal mute. 'I thought the poor creature appeared very distressed.'

For some time I simply stood there, feeling nothing, until he began to fidget again. 'And she left no message? Don't make any mistakes about this one, Peter; if she left a message it's more than your life's worth to forget about it.'

The great spectacles glinted dully as he shook his head. 'No message, Clem; I'm sorry.' He shuffled about, eyeing me uncomfortably. 'And now, Clem, please——'

'All right,' I said, 'I'm going. Don't you worry, Great-heart, old chap, I'm going right away.'

14

THE WIND was strong. It caught an empty cigarette carton to send it skipping and skating along the pavement in front of my face, the other side of the railings. My feet, planted on the area steps where I stood motionless in the dark, were starting to curl up with the cold but I ignored their complaints. They had done plenty of complaining before, years ago; this was the kind of game I was used to. Collar turned up, the pistol in my pocket with ten shots to go, I watched the bleak, empty street intently. Away down the road a West Indian party was still cutting up with a steel drum, but at this end the windows of the shabby houses were glittering black and silent. A cat prowled tigerishly past the railings, miaowed at me and sprang up on a dustbin, sending the lid clattering into the gutter.

The Roxy, a few streets away, would have closed by now. There shouldn't be much longer to wait. I had been waiting for most of the day, not here but in pubs and cafés out in Kent. After checking on one or two things I had taken a couple of long bus rides out that way, feeling that I would be less conscious of police activity outside London. But now I was back.

There was a soft squeak of rubber heels on the pavement coming towards me. I leaned back into the shadow and presently saw the shoes go past, the trousers whipped around the ankles by the wind, the broad backside above. This was my man. Without making any noise, I went up the steps and

out into the street after him. He was a quiet walker, hands in his pockets, hat rammed down on his head, but I did it better and faster, so that he was turning up the steps to his door before he realized that I was beside him.

'Don't go in yet, Arthur,' I said in a conversational tone. 'Walk a little way with me.'

As he whirled round I stepped back and let him have a glimpse of the gun. A wrestler he might be, but tonight I could look after him. Eyeing me, he seemed to realize this too, and to make up his mind for him I suggested, 'Go on: bet me I wouldn't.'

He didn't do anything so foolish and I jerked my head along the road. 'This way.'

With me slightly to the rear we walked along to the next street where a line of cars were parked for the night. I shepherded him to the one I had hired that afternoon. 'It's open, Arthur. Get behind the wheel. And bear in mind: all I want is an excuse.'

He did as he was told and I sat in the back, the pistol out of my pocket now. 'Start her up. I'll tell you where to drive.'

We set off through the death-like streets of London in the small hours. It didn't take us long to get to Knightsbridge where we parked in a side street. I got out first, covering him openly with the gun. There was nobody around to stare. 'Through there.' I indicated the entrance to a yard beside a large, glossy office block and marched him in front of me to a service door. 'Put your hands against it. Lean on it. Get your feet farther back.' When he was stretched out almost horizontally I stood beside him with one foot in front of his ready to kick his legs away if he should try anything, took a key from my pocket and unlocked the door. As I pushed it open Mr. Patch tumbled forward on to his face. 'Make less noise,' I cautioned him icily.

The power for the lifts was turned off so we walked up two

flights of stairs to a big glass door protected by a chromium grill. This time I made him kneel down while I opened up; then we went into a big room, carpeted, with two big desks and a small one, a couple of hooded typewriters. A great plate-glass window ran the length of one wall.

'Lie down,' I ordered, 'down on your face.' He did as he was told and stayed there while I drew the blinds. The door to the inner office was unlocked. I opened it.

'Don't bother to stand up, Arthur. Crawl. Through here.'

I eyed him malignantly as he went past me on hands and knees. I made him lie down again while I drew the blinds in there, turned on a desk lamp and pressed a switch beside it. There was a liquor cabinet against one wall and I took from it a bottle of Scotch and a couple of glasses. In front of the desk, facing it squarely, I arranged an armchair.

'All right, Arthur,' I told him pleasantly, 'you can get up now.'

I leaned against the wall, keeping well clear, as he climbed slowly to his feet. 'Sit down there.' He sat in the armchair and I went round to the other side of the desk, sat down and turned the desk lamp on his face so that I sat in shadow behind it. For a while I didn't say anything but filled both glasses from the Scotch bottle, pushing one across to him. 'Knock it back, Arthur.' I had the gun on the desk under my hand and as he hesitated jerked it up. 'Don't just sit there. Knock it back.'

Silently he picked up the glass and drained it. 'Not a bad set of offices, these,' I remarked. 'I used to work here once; perhaps in a way I do still, since no one's ever given me notice. Still have the keys, as you'll have observed. You'll have heard about the Wooden Spoon Clubs, Arthur?' I lowered my voice to a solemn hush. 'We are now sitting in their headquarters. I brought you up here because it makes a handy little retreat, they've got the apparatus I need here

and, well, it seemed fitting, in a way. The man who finances this place, and the Wooden Spoon Clubs, financed that little job at the Roxy yesterday evening.'

With the lamp glaring into them the cold grey eyes looked dull, blinking and shifting now in an effort to escape the light. It swept over him and made a circle on the low ceiling above us; the rest of the room remained dark. 'A multi-millionaire, Arthur,' I went on. 'Doesn't it make your eyes glisten, Arthur? Think of all that loot. And all yours to command. Now that you know who he is. Here, have another drink while you think about it.'

I refilled his glass and took a pull at my own while I watched him thinking about it as he drank.

'I dunno what the hell you're talking about,' he said at length.

'Have it your way. I had another reason for bringing you here. It will suit me fine to have you found dead in this office. It'll make the police inquisitive about Mr. Polaris's affairs.'

'Who?'

'That's the man, Arthur. Mr. Courtney Polaris. Heard about him?'

'Read about him,' he snapped. 'Saw him once on TV. What about it?'

The eyes were blinking faster than ever as he chewed over what I had said about having him found dead there. 'He's the boy,' I said. 'He's the one who paid you to rig that phoney ambush.'

'I never——' he almost yelled. I shushed him gravely.

'Don't make too much noise. It scares me. Have another drink.'

'I don't want another drink.'

'Perhaps you'd like that bullet in the guts I was talking about? It would stir up the Scotch a treat.'

‘You wouldn’t—’

‘I gave it to Les, didn’t I?’ My voice was thin and unpleasant. ‘Why shouldn’t I give it to you?’

He took the glass with a shrug. I got up from my seat, taking the gun with me, and leaned by the window watching him. I had been pouring man-size measures and his stomach nerves were beginning to react to the tension. He coughed over this one and the veins started to show in his eyes.

‘Let’s cut the cackle,’ I said. ‘Do you imagine I don’t *know* that you knew there was someone else up there with Les? He was the one who brought Les to you in the first place. Les needed a hide-out and this man had had a good deal to do with you at one time in a professional capacity. Oh, I know who he was, Arthur, as well as you do. Don’t sneer. Think how obvious you made it. The way you dashed in straight after the shots, for example. A man like you would have been too clever to have done a fool thing like that and risk getting his head blown off. Why, even the bogy realized that, Arthur. Didn’t you see him chewing it over?’

I nodded towards the bottle. ‘Pour yourself a drink. Don’t hang about, *pour one*.’ I gave him a wolfish smile. ‘Go on, try throwing it at me if you like.’

‘I can’t keep drinking this bloody stuff at this rate,’ he grunted. I strolled round the desk towards him.

‘Take a tip from me, Arthur, and try.’

He tried, but as he was in the act of tossing it off I was right on top of him and jabbed hard with the gun muzzle into his throat. He made an agonized noise, ‘Huygh-chrrugh,’ and his eyes turned wide in panic as he choked.

He rolled from his chair and writhed on the floor at my feet, struggling for very life. His fingers dug into the carpet, clutched and jerked at it with such violence that a vase tumbled off a bookcase across the room. Half the furniture jumped in apparent sympathy with his suffering. Leaning

against the wall with the automatic cradled inside my forearm, I had lit a cigarette when he started to come round and dragged himself into a sitting position.

'Take your time,' I said unemotionally. 'It's all you've got.'

He looked at me with hatred but now he was scared. I asked, 'Ready to tell me about it?'

'I tell you——' His voice was like sandpaper. He had to gulp and start again. 'I don't know what you're on about. What you picking on me for?'

His glass had rolled on to the floor. I retrieved it, poured some more whisky and handed it to him. 'Here. This will make you feel better.' For a moment I thought he was going to cry. 'Drink it up. Remember: I've got nothing to lose. Keep that in mind.'

He drank it. But with a struggle. While he was thus engaged I switched out the table lamp and raised the blind.

'Now we're going to have a little game, Arthur,' I told him. 'We're going to see how strong that head of yours really is.'

The windows in here opened outwards. I opened them. 'Stand up,' I ordered. He did so with an effort and I gestured courteously towards the window. 'Up on the window-sill.'

'No. For God's sake——'

'Suppose you use your loaf, boy,' I snarled. 'The way things stand at present, it doesn't make much difference to me whether I put a slug into you or not. You've got one chance. Stand up on the window-sill.'

I made a ferocious movement with the automatic. He flinched away and green-faced approached the window. Its sill was only a foot from the floor; he clutched at its side as he mounted. The office looked out on to the backs of other office blocks, all of them dark now. Outside it, a ledge ran around the building. I leaned beside Patch and told him,

'Move along a little. Get your back against the wall.'

'No,' he croaked. 'Can't.' Below us was darkness and a straight plunge down to the concrete yard. If he fell, he would be killed. I didn't care.

'I'll tell you once more. If you don't move, I'll push you over.'

He began a painful shuffle sideways until at length he stood with his back to the building perched on six inches of concrete. I sat on the window-sill and looked at him. 'Here we stay until something happens. One of two possibilities: one: you fall off; two: you tell me about the set-up in the Roxy yesterday.'

'I'm going to spew.'

'Carry on. There's nobody down below.'

A damp wind was blowing. Patch stood spreadeagled and quivering while I watched him. When he reached out to try and clutch the corner of the window I rapped harshly, 'Leave it alone.'

'It'll be murder,' he quavered on the wind.

'What's one more murder to me, Arthur?'

'All right, Christ, all right. It was the way you said, I'll tell you, only let me in, for God's sake.'

I took a deep breath and stood up. 'O.K. Come back in. But if you're joking this time, by Jesus you're through.' This time I almost felt anxious as I watched him shuffling back to the window. As he put a foot forward into the room he swayed suddenly, gave a wild cry and fell backwards. Just in time I caught him by his shirt, yanked and tumbled him on to the carpet.

'All right, Arthur,' I said, 'let's hear about it.'

He lay silent for some moments, panting, until I began to grow impatient. 'Buck up, Arthur. Or out you go again.'

At last he crawled slowly upright, the sweat streaming down his face, and slumped into the armchair.

'It was the way you said. They rigged it. I thought they was just going to jump you, honest.'

'They?'

'Smith. Sergeant Smith, he used to be. He's still well in with the bogies and he knows a thing or two. He said he'd shop me to them if I didn't do what he told me. But I'll grass, honest. You take me to 'em and I'll give 'em the whole story.'

Standing behind him, I grinned with savage triumph. 'You just did, Arthur,' I said. 'Thanks.'

Then I hit him behind the ear with the gun and he toppled over once more. This time he lay still. I stood for some moments breathing hard, found myself trembling so lit a cigarette. Then I switched on the desk lamp once more. The dictaphone had been on the desk, close by Patch's elbow. A tastefully designed piece of work, it had escaped his attention, or, rather, he hadn't realized what it was. The tape itself was in a compartment under the desk. I switched the machine off and opened the compartment to take out the spool; then I felt something crawling up the back of my neck. I hadn't been conscious of hearing anything; but I now knew there was somebody in the outer office.

15

THERE WAS nothing else for it. Instead of snatching out the spool, I turned the machine back on and switched quickly over to play back. My eyes on the door I waited with the gun levelled, crouched right down so that I was peering straight across the smooth top of the desk. I heard my own voice, sounding flat and hesitant, say, 'All right, Arthur.' Then it gabbled with nasal heartiness, 'You can stand up now.'

There was frosted glass in the door but, since the room beyond was in darkness like this one, that didn't help me much. In any case, he would be flattened against the wall beside it. I watched the door handle. A few odd noises and bumps came from the dictaphone, then it muttered, 'Knock it back, Arthur.' The door handle moved. In utter silence I left the cover of the desk and streaked for the wall behind the door. Despite the years of dissipation I could still move fast when I had to.

'Don't just sit there,' snapped the tape in what seemed deafening tones, 'Knock it back.' The door moved very slightly. Whoever was out there could hear the continued mutter of voices and had decided to risk a look. I tensed, still crouched low, poised on the balls of my feet with the little nervous tremor running through me that I recognized from the old days. I had the gun in one hand—my good one—and a heavy paperweight in the burnt left. The glow of the city outside fell through the windows to light the room a little. 'Not a bad set of offices, these,' said the dictaphone. The

door was pushed wider so that now the light from the window passed through the frosted pane as well. It was enough to show me the profile of a very big shadow on the far side.

The shadow froze suddenly. He had spotted Arthur slumped on the carpet. Heedless of possible damage to my wound, I flung the paperweight with all my might through the glass panel. With the crash of glass and the thud that accompanied it I was at the door and before the fragments had finished falling to the floor I had flung it wide, the gun raised, and stared into Charles's dazed face. A section of my brain registered the trickle of blood by his eye where the paperweight had hit him; then I smashed the gun down on his great thick skull. He lurched against the doorpost but didn't fall. I was about to clout him again when, behind him, close up, I saw Stefan. There was something in his right hand but Charles was blocking his field of fire; so instead of thumping the latter to the floor I gave him a hard shove to send him into the Pole. He tried vaguely to close with me, I stamped on his foot and hurled myself past. A shot seemed to shake the walls but the Pole had fired at random, by accident for all I knew, and there was no telling which way the bullet had gone. Clear of them both, I saw his hand come up again and fired from the hip myself. He yelled and spun round, clutching at his shoulder and his gun fell to the floor. From the inner office I heard myself say calmly and clearly, 'Here, have another drink.'

Then I dived out of the main door and ran for it. I had to get to my car before any stray police should be attracted by the shots. I spat out frantic curses through my teeth as I plunged down the stairs. Not for many years had I felt so furious. Just for a moment it had looked as though I might have succeeded in kicking my way out of the web; now, the precious tape-recording was out of reach in the Wooden Spoon offices, saying its vital piece with only Charles and

Stefan to hear. Savagely I told myself, 'You should have killed them both while you had the chance. And that gin-peddling Patch into the bargain.'

The street outside was still quiet. I got to the car, started up and roared away from the kerbside, bashing my way straight through the gears into top with my foot hard down. This looked like the end of it; but I promised myself that I would settle one or two accounts before the curtains finally closed. There were beads of moisture on the windscreen, crossing beacons winked their meaningless signals at me, traffic islands shimmered like warning spectres in the empty streets as I drove fast across London.

By the time I was beyond Basingstoke it was a fine morning with a bright if watery sun and I took the risk of stopping for breakfast at a transport cafe. Here I was able to get hold of a paper and looked through it carefully. I was still on the front page but only rated half a column now. You had to be a pretty consistent and spectacular killer to hold the headlines nowadays. The search was going on and my name and description were repeated, including the fact that I had a burned left hand. No doubt Court had obligingly given them the details of the wound under the bandages; a nuisance because it meant having to eat bacon and eggs with my gloves on. The paper I was reading was one which claimed to be respectable and family and the rest, so I looked around for one more uninhibitedly mucky to see if they had more space to devote to my rather prosaic murder. I found one and it did, but there was nothing much beyond the routine nationwide man hunt, with detectives combing the West End as usual. There was, however, some biographical stuff: they had got hold of some of the more melodramatic features of my war career, which ought to keep the story simmering for a while; and I noted one phrase with regretful interest. *The police now think, it ran, that the killer spent the night of the crime*

not far away from the scene where it took place, while police with dogs searched for him within yards of his hiding place. It seemed that poor Kathy wasn't going to get her blaze of publicity after all; reading between the lines I could visualize her trying to spin her yarn to the inspector with the sandy moustache and wondered how many minutes it had taken him to shake the truth out of her.

I had the entire day to get through before I could do anything more, so took the drive easily, travelling along by-roads, twisting through wintry country lanes, making several stops for sandwiches, beer and cigarettes. Then, as I got closer to my goal, I simply drove around until it began to get dark. The first thing I needed was a reasonably comfortable hiding place as a base. The woods which ran along the high ground behind Long Hall offered the greatest promise and I cruised up towards them, keeping a look-out on both sides. It wouldn't do to get too close with the car.

I had inspected and rejected a couple of places when I saw a muddy track running away uphill amongst the trees. I turned into it a little way, stopped the car again and got out to take a look. The track led me up through the woods until I reached a point where the ground fell steeply away on one side. Here I halted and looked down. It was a very deep dell in the hillside, its floor still covered in rotting leaves, tall trees and bushes growing out of the slopes around. I studied it thoughtfully, noting the large clump of bushes near the bottom. I couldn't search indefinitely and although this didn't look exactly cosy in the semi-darkness, with the wind rushing through the treetops, it afforded plenty of cover and looked isolated.

I returned to the car, started up and drove up the lane in bottom gear, leaning forward in my seat now to see the way. When I reached the top of the dell once more I could see little in the thickening dusk but gloom below. Very slowly I

turned the car off the track down the hill and seemed to be peering into a bottomless pit with no idea what might be directly in front of the wheels; so I took a chance and turned on the sidelights. Branches twisted blackly in front of the bonnet and I nosed the car through them, braking with the engine, edging my way towards the clump of bushes I had picked out. Tilted as though in a nose dive, I wondered what would happen if I wanted to get out again in a hurry and concluded I should have to walk. I approached my objective a little to one side, hauled hard on the wheel and succeeded in bringing the vehicle around to force its way into the midst of the bushes until halted by a sturdy, stubborn hawthorn trunk. That would have to do. I got out, climbed up the slope a little way and looked down. From the side where the track lay, she was almost completely screened. Satisfied, I got back into the car. I was tired. Apart from a few uneasy hours in the small bedroom where Kathy had hidden me, I had had no sleep since leaving O'Laley's, and the going since then had been pretty hectic. The burn on my hand still bothered me and my frame had not yet recovered properly from its shaking up on the building site. I had shaved before quitting Peter Greatheart's inhospitable abode but since then had not been able to manage more than one clean-up in a public washroom, so that I felt a mess. Altogether, it was quite like old times again.

I thought briefly about Esther. There was no telling, I decided with a shrug, where she had gone or what she would do. Successive defeats must have bred in her a habit of despair, so that she had given up as soon as she discovered what had happened, or the public version of what had happened, at the Roxy. Quite probably she thought I really had killed Les. I wondered if Polaris had got her back yet. I wasn't angry with her any more, only sorry, very sorry. At any rate, I'd see to it that Polaris didn't paw her for much longer.

I was awakened by the cold. The car windows were pitch black and shiny and for a moment I had difficulty in remembering where I was. To rouse myself I got out a cigarette and smoked it quietly, slumped in the seat, thinking of nothing, shielding the glowing end with my hand. Then I opened the door and clambered up the slope to the cart track.

My watch said half-past two. I had slept soundly and felt better for it but there was the hollow in my stomach that comes with the small hours, reinforced by hunger. I knew my position and that of Long Hall and through the branches above me I observed a couple of grudging stars which helped me to check. I followed the track upwards, slipping a little on the slimy surface, to follow the spine of the ridge so as to end up behind and above the Hall. I had a long walk in front of me, mainly across country, but after a while my tiredness and the midnight chill slipped from me and the march became a familiar business like many I had done before. I leaned into it, rolling with the ground in a relaxed slouch, the best posture for long-distance walking if you've something to do at the end of it, trailing my feet but keeping them instinctively always a fraction of an inch above the dead leaves and twigs. I missed the weight of the machine carbine on my arm, the bombs and equipment which eventually I had learned to use as an aid rather than an encumbrance, balancing myself with them.

Taking it easily, I arrived on the road above Long Hall at about four o'clock. I took out the automatic and checked it, balanced it for a moment in my hand with a sensual pleasure at the smooth, efficient feel of the butt against my palm, and slipped it back into my pocket where I could get at it quickly. Then I left the road and began pushing through the trees, moving very carefully now, until I had a clear view of the Hall with the gardens and park around it. It wasn't much of a view for all that; it was very dark now and below me not a

light was to be seen. The house was a great black silent mass with a broad sweep of lesser darkness around it. From the look of things, everybody was asleep.

I started down the hill. The descent involved a good deal of slithering and some tripping over roots. Once clear of the woods, I had a broad paddock to cross before entering the huge ornamental garden which lay behind the house. The grass was thick and wet, soaking the bottoms of my trousers as my feet sank down into it. I was halfway across when I noticed something making for me.

It wasn't a man. No man could crouch as low and move as fast as that, head barely above the lush grass. I squinted at it, bent at the knees and reached for the pistol. People had been expecting me; here was number one on the reception committee.

Making a long steady rattling noise in its throat, ears laid back, it was some kind of wolfish near-Alsatian, too big to be of the true breed. I just had time to tug the gun out as he sprang at me.

The Germans, so I had heard, used to train their guard dogs to go for the genitals; someone else had had the same idea. But as he snapped I slashed with the pistol, pivoting from the ankles, all my weight behind the blow; it banged his head sideways, his jaws clashed on the steel barrel and it was torn from my grasp while, with a shoulder like an international wing forward's, he bowled me to the ground.

His own impetus carried him over me with a stink of dog and rough fur scraping against my face. On my back, I reached up as he skidded round and snatched at his throat, going for the windpipe. I got it, giving him a shrewd dig and heard him cough; but he jerked away, my fingers slipped and all I could do was clutch desperately at the greasy fur. If I lost that hold I was lost as well. His immense fangs gleamed

within inches of my face; they would rip through flesh and bone as efficiently as any crocodile's. Threshing about in my weakening grasp, he snapped and with a great crack his jaws closed on the shoulder of my coat. I was shaken like a rag doll, lost my grip on him and found the automatic under my hand. Thrusting the muzzle against his head, I blew his brains out.

There was no time to worry about the noise. Across the paddock two more dogs were racing for me full pelt. I lay prone, sighted on one and fired again and he stumbled forward on to his nose. They were only shadows bobbing on the grass and my next shot missed. I got a grip on myself, held my fire and waited until he was in full view, the big bad wolf from a nightmarish fairy tale, then shot him at close range through the heart. Their carcasses lay on the ground near me, the second of them some twenty yards off. I lay where I was, the gun cocked at the ready in front of me with my left hand supporting my right, surveying the ground ahead and cursing the people who made killer dogs. Away in the house a bright rectangle of light appeared upstairs, with more subdued glimmers in one or two other windows. I pondered whether to move in or to retreat; everyone must know by now that I had arrived; that was too bad. I had come to make trouble, and was going on with it. The light in the window went out abruptly. Possibly it had occurred to them that they might be inviting a bullet; or perhaps they were now about to make a sally in force covered by the darkness.

Someone might have seen the flashes as I mowed down the guard dogs and pin-pointed my position; so I rolled, crawled, then ran at a crouch the rest of the distance across the paddock, vaulted an iron rail and plunged into the garden. The flower beds were thick and heavy; a little naked boy on a pedestal stared aloofly into the middle distance as I stepped carefully past him.

There was a sudden explosion in front of me and I nose-dived into the earth as pellets swished amongst the bushes to my left. Hard afterwards a sporting rifle cracked twice somewhere and I heard the whine of the bullets.

The General's men, it seemed, were out in defence of Court Polaris, and a little trigger-happy. Lights began coming on again; those in the big terrace rooms were switched on all at once, flooding the garden beyond the steps with illumination; the upstairs windows came to life in ragged succession as though men were running from room to room pressing the switches. Soon, the whole garden was quite light except for the blocks of shadow around the bushes and hedges, light enough for me to see a couple of the ambushers lying on the verge of the lawn where they thought their heads were hidden by a bank. Nothing was to be gained by sniping at them, however; there was probably quite a crowd waiting for some sign of my whereabouts in order to open up. All they had to do was watch the patches of shadow and shoot at anything that moved.

A rifle barked suddenly, a heavier gun than before, three or four times and again I heard the whine of bullets but couldn't see what he was shooting at. I was lying under a clump of slender young trees with some of the lowest branches touching my face. Very cautiously I removed my tie and began lashing my pistol to the stem of one of them. The heavy gun began firing again, pumping slugs, as far as I could tell, at random up the garden. This time I could spot the flashes.

I had smeared earth across my face to break up the outline. Keeping my head well down, feeling in the darkness with my fingers, I tied the automatic securely, the muzzle towards the house. Then I put the safety catch on, reached behind me for one of the low branches of the next tree and bent it forward, threading its thin, wiry end through the trigger guard. Again the rifle began to roar and this time I

heard the bullets smacking into wood and earth somewhere near me. I realized now what the plan was: the marksman was picking out the clumps of darkness where I might be hidden and firing several rounds into each in turn. That could be George Smith himself and for a moment I debated whether to undo my work and have a crack at where I could see he was in cover. But now there was a noise of car engines as well and glancing over my shoulder I could see the glow of headlamps beyond the garden in the paddock. I was right in the middle of it with a vengeance.

I got out a match, nipped off the head and wedged it into the trigger guard so as to hold the twig away from the trigger; but when I let go of the branch to see what would happen the match jumped out and the twig was pulled back by the branch. Had the safety catch not been on, the gun would have gone off. There was another succession of shots aimed this time quite close to me. There was more light as well; they had got one car up to the garden's edge, and someone with more guts than brains was operating a spot, turning it on one patch of shadow after another. I wondered where Courtney Polaris was while all this was going on; but there was no time to feel bitter, the job I had in hand was too ticklish for that. I had to fix the match so that it would hold the twig back for a short while; but it was equally important not to make too firm a job of it.

I saw the spotlight sliding across the rose beds, hovering behind a pallid statue of a kneeling woman, moving on towards me. This time the match stayed in place but it couldn't be long before the pressure of the branch snapped it away. With infinite care I took the safety catch between finger and thumb and eased it gently back. Then I began to slide on my stomach, levering myself along with toes and elbows, out of my hiding place and across the garden. The rifle banged again. I could see the ground in front of me quite clearly as I

wriggled, pressed flat into the soil, and felt I must constitute a great black bulk slowly but very perceptibly moving along. It could hardly be a matter of minutes before the spotlight caught me. Then I came upon a length of hooped iron railing separating the flower bed from the path beyond. It could only have been six inches high; but, as an effective barrier, it might have been as many feet. Quite close on my left I heard whispering.

There were more shots. The sound was becoming almost monotonous now. But this time they were answered. The tugging of the branch as it made to swing back into place had displaced the matchstick, the twig had whipped against the hair trigger and with an angry roar the magazine emptied itself in the general direction of the enemy. It only lasted for a matter of seconds but in that space of time I had jerked myself over the railing, come up on my feet and fled, my nose still almost at ground level, for the garden wall. As I went a general fusillade broke out, shotguns, rifles and what sounded like pistols as well stabbing the glow of the electric lights with brief, staccato brilliance. But their target was the spot where I had rigged the gun to cover my retreat and I took full advantage of the brief blindness to everything else which the surprise of the shots had induced in them to flop down beside the wall before silence fell again.

Now I heard men's voices calling to each other. There was a pause then a voice shouted, 'Better give up, Morris. We're all around you.' Then, in a quiet tone which carried to me clearly, however, in the silence of the night: 'Close in.' George Smith had taken charge.

Close to me two men rose up cautiously, guns in their hands, and began moving forward at a crouch. But by this time I was behind them. I got going again, wriggling at first which was slow going and I knew I had only a few moments before they discovered they had been fooled. A car came

right into the garden, its engine whining as it bumped across paths and flower beds with headlights blazing. They weren't aimed on me, however, and provided a welcome distraction. I got to my feet and, dodging from cover to cover, gained the end of the terrace steps without being spotted. Here I was able to duck around a corner and stand upright for the first time since the shooting began.

Screened now from the men in the garden, I moved fast along the side of the house. Probably they had men on watch around here too, but with luck they would have been attracted into the garden. All the lights were blazing around here too, but presently I reached a room that had been apparently overlooked, in darkness, with a small french window. It was locked. There was no time for fancy measures so I punched a pane out with my forearm, managing to make little more than a dull bursting noise, reached in and opened up. I went across the room in a rush in case anyone should have heard and been attracted to the spot, opened the door smoothly and slid around it into the passage. My luck still held; the corridor was empty, half-lit by the illumination from the hall at one end. I turned the other way and made for the back stairs.

As I reached them I heard someone approaching around the corner. I ducked swiftly up the staircase and around the turn, then paused to listen. Whoever it was went past along the corridor. All very well, but perhaps he would notice where I had broken in. It couldn't be helped; there was one place where I had to look, so I had better get it done in what time I had before they shifted the search indoors.

I met no one in the upstairs corridors. Probably they hadn't expected me to get this far. But when I reached Esther's room I paused and listened carefully. It was just the place where Court, an astute man, might think a precautionary guard advisable. There was no sound whatever and I

couldn't stand there all night; so I tried the handle, felt it give and pushed the door open. The room, like the others, was brilliantly lighted; lighted and empty. I went across it to the bedroom, heedless of what guns might be waiting in there for me; that was empty as well. The bed had been stripped, a wardrobe door stood open, nothing but coat hangers inside. She hadn't come back. I grinned to myself with a great relief, then heard a shout from outside. I couldn't see anything in the darkness but realized then that I was standing in the middle of the lighted room, the curtains drawn back, in full view from the garden and they had spotted me. That had done it.

I started running again, with barely breath to inform myself that I had been an arrogant bloody fool in coming to Long Hall at all. No use making for Court's apartments; they would be expecting that. I reached the stairs again and began to climb higher. They must be coming after me but weren't making much noise about it. I didn't like that either; it was too efficient.

Most of Long Hall was of three floors with an attic storey above that. Only a few rooms on the third floor were occupied, and none of the attics as far as I knew. On the third floor I stopped to listen; this time, down below, I could hear a hurried clumping of feet. A passage ran one way and I darted along that towards a door at the end.

It was unlocked. The room beyond presented a bizarre aspect, a long, unoccupied apartment which had been used as a dumping ground for stuff from the house which the present occupants hadn't seen their way to using. The pale light filtering through the uncurtained windows fell on the aquiline profile of a bust on a tall pedestal, a scarcely ornamental urn, a tallboy and other bits of furniture including a fourposter bed with only two of its curtains left and those hanging by a couple of rings. The floorboards were bare save for a carpeting of dust. It was a room for ghosts. I hugged

the wall as I went along it in case anyone should come in.

At the far end was another door where I listened. All was quiet outside. When I tried the handle the door gave so I opened it very gently. The landing outside was in darkness. I slid on to it, ears cocked and eyes straining and, just in time, picked out the round shadow of a head peering at me through the bannister rails from the well of the stairs. He made an abrupt movement and I heard a hard knock as a gun barrel bumped against the woodwork. The attic stairs were beside me and I dodged up them as a deafening explosion roared behind me and pellets smacked into the wall where I had been a moment before. I heard voices and more feet pounding the stairs.

There was a door at the top of the staircase I was on and when I pulled at it it stuck. I yanked at it savagely, this time it opened and I slipped inside, slamming it shut behind me.

It was fitted with a puny bolt and I pushed that to. It might afford me a few minutes' respite, but not much. Even as I looked around I heard people arriving outside and a rattle at the handle. I had trapped myself in a small, utterly empty garret.

Outside someone said excitedly, 'He's in there. Door's locked.'

'No lock,' said someone else. 'He's shot the bolt. Stand out of the way; I'll soon open that.' I recognized the voice. It was George Smith in person.

My forehead damp with sweat I opened the window and looked out. Behind me there was a resounding crash and the door jumped on its hinges. It would only need one more kick like that.

Perhaps I had a little luck left after all, however. The parapet, which ran the length of the building, was just below the attic windows. Getting out was a tight squeeze and at one point I had one leg outside, one in and my trunk was

leaning over beyond the parapet. It was beginning to get light now and I could see the ground a sickening distance below. Fiercely I cursed myself as a damned, big-headed idiot for getting into such a mess. Inside the room there was another crash followed by a bang as the door flew open and I got my rear foot out just in time as a man rushed after me.

I moved quickly on all fours out of reach from the window, then stood up and began making my way along the parapet. Out here, at this height, the wind was strong, tugging at my clothes and pushing at me, and I had to keep taking a firm grip on myself to maintain my balance. Behind me a voice shouted, 'Morris! Come back, you lunatic. You'll kill yourself!'

Of course, the man was right. And where did I think I was going, anyway? All they had to do was to follow me along inside the building.

The stone suddenly shifted under my feet. Incredulously, I found it heeling outwards and sinking and myself sinking with it. It seemed to happen quite slowly so that for a while I was poised wobbling on the edge with time to think, 'The parapet has given way. *Christ. I'm falling!*' Then, with fear-some abruptness, came the plunge and I heard my voice crying, 'Aaah-aah!' while what was left of my brain reflected: 'These old buildings quickly become dangerous without a lot of maintenance.'

Then there was a blow on my elbow, a fearful wrench at my arms. I had clutched at the remaining stonework and momentarily saved myself so that instead of plummeting to the terrace below I was hanging by my hands with my legs dangling in space. But my left hand was burned, almost useless; I clenched my teeth, forcing it to endure the pain and hold on but in spite of me the fingers relaxed and slipped away, leaving me trying to hang by one hand. The fingers of that hand began to slip back along the stonework.

There was a face looking down at me, one I recognized, watching me with calm eyes while the wind ruffled the thin yellow hair. I glared up at him, felt myself utter a sob of hate, baffled anger and fear. Then a strong hand gripped my wrist and pulled. From somewhere else my collar was seized and slowly I was drawn upwards. I kicked about with my legs, trying to find a foothold that would enable me to take some of my weight and clamber up, and heard Smith mutter urgently, 'Keep still, for God's sake. You'll have us all down.' The parapet on which his chest rested while he tugged at my arm had trembled ominously. So I hung there in space while he edged backwards gnawing his lip as he went. I could see the sweat on his face. At length my chest was on a level with the parapet top and I was able to grip it with my arms. Again it quivered underneath me. The unseen man on the other side of the gap caught the slack of my trousers and heaved with me and Smith until I lay prone on top of the stone-work. I wriggled along it, Smith tugging me by the hand, expecting at every moment the gentle crumbling that would finish us. A window was open, closer than the one from which I had escaped, and Smith helped drag me in through it. I tumbled on to the floor and lay there gasping.

Something cold snapped around my wrist, then around the other. I blinked dumbly at the handcuffs then looked up to find the sandy-moustached inspector surveying me quite calmly while he brushed himself down. George Smith stood behind him. There were other men there, one of them in a blue uniform.

'That was nearly your lot,' remarked the inspector. 'You'd have found it safer to have come quietly in the first place. Clement Morris, I arrest you for the murder of Leslie Moran and I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence.'

16

WE DROVE some ten miles to the nearest police station with suitable accommodation and there I began to shake with delayed shock so they gave me a mug of tea and made me lie down under some blankets in a cell. I lay there smoking and staring at the ceiling. It was morning now and light enough for them to turn out the lamps. Some time later, Inspector Butters, as I had learned he was called, came in and stood looking down at me with his hands in his coat pockets.

‘How do you feel, Morris?’

‘Terrible.’ I didn’t feel too bad, in fact, but simply wanted to be left alone. A sense of dreary boredom, it could hardly be called despair, had enveloped me about the entire business.

‘Like some breakfast?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Come on,’ he coaxed. ‘Else how will you find the strength for your next escape bid?’

I swung my feet to the floor and sat pushing my hands through my hair. ‘All right, damn you. Tell them not to fry the eggs too hard.’

They brought me bacon and eggs in the cell and Inspector Butters watched me solicitously while I ate. Afterwards, he asked. ‘How about telling us a little about it all?’

‘It wouldn’t do you any good. I’m suffering from shock. I could take it all back again in court.’

‘Perfectly all right as far as I’m concerned. It’s to satisfy

my own curiosity rather than for the prosecuting counsel's benefit. Although, of course, I'd like to have it taken down if you've no objection.'

I gave him a sardonic grin. 'You go ahead and enjoy yourself.'

A plain-clothes man came in with a nice empty notebook and sat in one corner. It was the inspector who began the talking. 'The trouble with you, Morris, is that you think yourself too bloody smart. I don't know exactly what you thought you were going to do when you made your dash from the Roxy, but I'd like to point out that all you've achieved is to pile up a lot of aggravating circumstances against yourself. Now, why don't you try a quiet, reasonable approach for a change?'

I grinned. 'A decent, *repentant* approach, you mean? Inspector, I knew I was asking for it from the moment I snatched that gun from you. But I've been so firmly gummed to the spot that I had nothing to lose by trying to crack the case with a sledgehammer.' I felt suddenly sorry for myself. 'There wasn't any other way.'

He took the few paces up and down that the cramped space allowed. 'It's pretty hard to argue with the facts. You went there looking for him. You had every reason to have it in for him. We know all about what he'd done to you, the police here were after him for it. We know why. Woman trouble. Probably he started it at the Roxy; the knife was still there. But you can be, it seems, a savage customer. You're used to killing; we know the sort of thing you were doing in the war, we know you've lived a pretty rough sort of life since. For instance, we know about your record in the States. It's not very serious, I agree, but it's a record. A certain amount of psychological disturbance as well.'

'Plain, honest drinking,' I remonstrated sternly.

'That will fit the bill as well as anything else. All the

same——' He paused and paced around again. 'I don't mind letting on that one or two points interest me. Maybe you have got a version that's worth looking at. If you have, let's hear it now. We could have got this done a couple of days ago, if you'd used your head.'

'I'll tell you what really happened,' I said. 'Then you'll understand why I bolted.' I told him first how the killing had been stage-managed; then I told him who had done it; and I told him whose brain had arranged it all.

When I was finished he looked at me without liking. 'Why would you suggest Mr. Polaris should have gone to all this trouble for your benefit?' he enquired softly.

'You mentioned woman trouble just now. That's Polaris's trouble, for a woman who doesn't want him. And, in a way, it's worse for him because he's a eunuch. He's rather conscious of the fact.'

'And who is the lady?'

'Her name's Mrs. Gannelain.'

'Gannelain?' His voice rose incredulously. 'Now, Morris, Mrs. Gannelain has been living with him for years.'

'And now she isn't,' I snarled savagely. 'Suppose we just forget the whole thing?' I wasn't discussing Esther's morals with a phone-tapping copper. He seemed content to change the subject too. He surveyed me coldly.

'I suppose you realize', he remarked, 'that your killer, George Smith, could have got himself killed hauling you back over that parapet?'

'I know,' I said wearily. 'It was a point that had occurred to me, too.'

'Now, after going to such lengths to frame you for murder, why should he have risked his own life to save yours?'

'I don't know. You risked yours as well. Why was that?'

'It's my job. But it wasn't George's. He's not a policeman any longer.'

I met his stony eye with equal harshness. 'Perhaps it was remorse. What did you make of the mob at Long Hall?'

He looked wary. 'General Fletcher's staff? What about them?'

I grinned and mimicked him. 'General Fletcher's staff. Some of them were pinched for rioting not long ago. I used to belong to them.'

'So?'

'Nothing. Try to get hold of one of them named Charles Fairbrass—one of the leaders. Arthur Patch of the Roxy recorded a confession on tape admitting what I've just told you about the way the killing was rigged. Ask Fairbrass what he knows about it.'

'What would he know about it?'

'He's got it. He probably won't admit it, but you could ask him, all the same.'

He looked at me like someone humouring a patient and signalled to the stenographer to pack up his traps. 'Yes, we'll ask him. But I don't really feel that we're getting anywhere like this. We'll be driving back to London shortly. You'll be in court tomorrow morning.'

They went away leaving me for a while in what passed for peace. They had gone through the usual formalities, taking my shoe laces away in case I felt like hanging myself up with them. I had already lost my tie. It looked as though the Long Hall gang had succeeded in explaining all the shooting to Inspector Butters's satisfaction; probably as a heroic defence against my murderous onslaught. I wondered idly if anything more would come of the tape-recording. I doubted it.

The cell door opened again. George Smith stood framed in the entrance, stooping a little, looking down at me with his empty eyes. I wondered if they had held any expression when he shot Les. I stared back at him.

'Mind if I come in?' he asked at length, shuffling forward.

'Carry on. This is Liberty Hall. Make yourself at home.'

Somebody unseen pushed the door to as he came slowly into the cell to stand in silence for some moments. I sat and waited.

'How's it going?' he asked finally. His face was looser about the jowls than it had been and his lower lip hung slackly.

'Figure it out for yourself,' I answered. 'I'm under arrest for murder, I've spent the past couple of days running away from policemen and the past night being attacked by killer dogs, shot at by men with rifles and falling off roofs. And I'm out of cigarettes.'

'Oh, here,' he said hurriedly, pulling packets of twenty from his pockets, 'I've brought you a few to see you through. Anything of that sort you want, let 'em know outside. Inspector Butters and me, we know each other well from the old days. He's always ready to do me a favour.'

'That's a great comfort to know,' I remarked, reaching out for the cigarettes. 'Reckon you owe me these.'

He looked away, sighed, grinned propitiatingly. 'By God, I thought you were a goner up on the roof there.'

'So did I, George, so did I. And, in a manner of speaking, I was of course.'

He breathed out heavily once again. 'I know, you've got it in for me at the moment. Don't blame you. Sorry, chum; but it's not really my fault.'

'Oh, yes it is,' I said coldly.

'Look.' He ran a big hand through his thin hair. 'It's not much easier for me. I don't admit anything, mind. But there are some things—the way things are nowadays, I sometimes *have* to do jobs I don't like.'

'I know, George. You stepped out of line once, thinking you were on to a good thing. Since then you've just been

getting in deeper all the time. Anyhow, George,' I ended up cheerfully, 'you've one consolation. You can't get any lower than you are now.'

He didn't say anything. After a while I went on reflectively, 'Although, of course, one step further down might be when he decides to ditch you.'

His bloodshot eyes almost flickered back to life. 'What d'you mean?'

'It could be that you're becoming a bad risk, George. Why didn't you finish me off up on the roof?'

He looked startled. 'I wouldn't have done that.'

'No? Polaris might want to know why not. He may start to think you're slipping. You're showing signs of wear and tear as it is.'

He met my gaze for a few moments then shifted his eyes with an odd little grin. I continued: 'There's another thing as well. It's no longer such a close secret what really went on at the Roxy when Les was killed. I persuaded Arthur Patch to do a little talking about it. He didn't know it, but the conversation went on tape. The tape is at present going the rounds in certain quarters.'

Just for a moment he almost turned to dash out of the cell, then pulled himself together. 'Sounds interesting. But I wouldn't really know what you're talking about, of course.' There was a reedy note to his voice now.

I grinned. 'So, of course, you won't be interested in finding out where the tape got to.'

He stared at me helplessly. I was giving him the hot foot and enjoying it. 'I suppose you've told Inspector Butters all about it?' he asked at length.

'Yes, George. Go and ask him. Or see what Mr. Polaris can do for you.'

His mood of repentant good fellowship was dissolving. 'What I don't understand', he said, 'is why, if things are the

way you say they are, they've locked you up in here like this. You ought to sue them for wrongful arrest.'

'I'm considering it. That's something you won't be able to do when they finally catch up with you.'

He shrugged and turned to the door. 'Anyway,' he said, 'no hard feelings, eh?'

Cynical as I am, I couldn't help staring at him in astonishment. Then I laughed. 'You'll find out,' I said.

He nodded thoughtfully and went out.

We drove back to London that afternoon, arrived fairly late. They had endeavoured, apparently, to conceal from the press the station where I was to be lodged, but one or two of the vultures were there, all the same. I was vaguely aware of the popping of flashlights as we left the car, but wasn't taking much interest. They were a lot thicker on the ground when I was brought into court the following morning. Only the formalities were gone through before I was remanded in custody; it appeared that, in spite of Inspector Butters's boasts the previous day, the police hadn't yet got their case buttoned up. I learned with mild interest that a counsel had already been briefed for me; when I discovered at length that this had been done by a mob calling themselves simply 'A group of friends', but of whom Brigadier Powell was one, this feeling deepened to a warm emotion I hadn't had much experience of lately which almost moistened my poached old eyes. The butcher boys, it seemed, stuck together.

We had to fight our way out through the newshawks, headed, this time, for dear old Brixton Prison. The weather had taken a turn for the better, with a deceptively spring-like touch of sunshine but, of course, it couldn't make much difference to the wastes of south London. Once more I rendered up my shoe laces and took my ease on a cell pallet.

The defending counsel they had bought me was an ex-

pensive one. He ought to arrive shortly and I imagined to myself the line his proposed defence would take. 'Distinguished war record; severe emotional suffering caused by Communist devils—might make a lot of that, y'know. Hard times since the war; desperate character of the deceased, as demonstrated by his recent brutality towards the prisoner; savage attack with a knife a strongly mitigating circumstance. A frame-up? Courtney Polaris?' I visualized the judicious pursing of the lips. 'A trifle over-sensational for the modern jury; not a sound idea to drag Mr. Polaris into it.' Probably he lunched now and then with Polaris.

There were bootsteps outside the cell door and the lock snapped open. A voice said, 'Visitor, Morris,' and the door banged to again. Lying with my face towards the window I didn't bother to look round at first.

'Come right in,' I murmured. 'May I offer you a little sherry?'

There was only a trace of tears in the voice. 'Well, at least you're still in one piece, you stupid bastard.'

I took off from the bed in a smooth arc to land facing the door. She stood just inside it, her hair tumbled loose within her upturned collar, her eyes very large and dark in her pale face.

'So there you are, you silly bitch! Where the bloody hell have you been?'

It was altogether a most touching reunion. We met with a bump in the middle of the floor space and hung on, swaying about, muttering and whispering and chewing at each other. To prove she was glad to see me, Esther began to weep.

'I told you not to go there,' she choked. 'You wouldn't listen.'

'Quite right. You were a wise little woman. In future, honey, I'll always do as I'm told; if there is a future, that is.'

She looked down, snuffling, and took a grip on herself.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to nag.' White and drawn, she looked like my Lady Death. 'How bad is it, Clem?'

I made a wry face, tried to look more optimistic than I felt. 'Not very clever at present, I'm afraid.'

'They won't—they won't——' She looked at me with terror-struck eyes.

'No, it won't be a hanging matter, Esther, don't worry yourself about that. In fact, as murder sentences go, I may get off pretty lightly. With luck it might wind up simply as manslaughter.'

'Luck! How many years are you going to be shut away for if we're *lucky*?'

I had said the wrong thing. But there was something I had to get said, so I ploughed awkwardly on. 'Look, Esther; we'll simply have to see how the trial goes. If it goes badly—well, I don't want things made worse by the thought of you hanging around eating your life away for the next ten years.'

She looked at me quietly and steadily. 'Go on.'

'I mean we'll simply have to admit we're licked and cut our losses. The past few days I've been learning one thing: that the most important thing in life is to be able to roll with a punch. If you can't do that, you're nothing, you break too easily. I could never do it, not back in Yugoslavia either, and you can see where it got me. No, Esther, when you know you're beaten, throw it in. If they put me away for a long stretch, I want you to write me off. Start again.'

She didn't say anything for a moment, just stood looking at me with the tear-stains on her cheeks; then moved closer and smiled sadly and gently. 'I ought to bat you one for that. Could you start again, Clem?—Just like that? No, and neither could I, even if I wanted to. I've had all the trying to start again I can take. And all that's happened between us—does it really mean as little to you as that?'

She looked at me squarely, waiting for an answer.

'You know damn well what it means to me,' I said gruffly.

'All right, Clem; so there we are—stuck with it. I've not long realized it myself. I went round to the Roxy myself, that—that night. When I found what had happened, I blamed you. You'd thrown everything away. Then, of course, when I read you'd been caught and knew where you were'—she gave me another smile, wryly tender—'I was round at your friend Powell's place fast as I could go. This champion lawyer he's found for you got me in. So——'

She stopped with a shrug and we stood in heavy silence for some minutes. At length I said, 'You think I killed him too, eh?'

Her head came up quickly. 'What should I think?'

I gave her a sheepish grin and she made no resistance as I reached out to take her hand. 'I was a stupid bastard, all right, in going there. But I didn't kill poor Leslie.'

Drawing her down on to the bed beside me, I gave her the story of how it happened and an outline of my adventures since. She listened quietly. I could feel her relaxing in one way even while anger and bitterness mounted within her.

'He always comes out on top,' she said dully when I had finished. 'God knows how many better men that maimed devil has done for. And that tape recording that could have cleared you: what's happened to it? Surely someone could come forward with it?'

'My guess is', I said, 'that General Fletcher's sitting on it. Fairbrass and his pal must have found it; they would have passed it on to him. Unless——' An unpleasant thought had struck me.

'Unless what?'

'Unless Arthur Patch came round and managed to grab the tape himself.'

'I see.' She shivered slightly. 'Why should General Fletcher sit on it?'

I shrugged. 'He's not exactly fond of me. Probably he still thinks I tipped off the police about the raid on Patchers'.'

'But surely he wouldn't——' She broke off, frowned, then looked at me with sudden fright. 'Clem, I don't think they'll let me stay much longer.'

She was right. Soon after there was a scraping of boot soles outside. 'Sorry, Mrs. Gannelain,' said the warder. 'Time's up.'

She stood up, buttoning her coat with fumbling fingers. 'We were going to Australia, weren't we?' She gave a harsh little laugh. 'I never realized it was so far away.'

She didn't look at me again, just put out her hand to touch my finger-tips and almost ran outside. The warder pulled the door to slowly, regarding me with a mixture of mawkish sympathy and unashamed inquisitiveness. I gave him a toothy smile and a little wave.

Left alone, I stood on the end of my bed and peered out of the window. The sunlight had faded and all I could see was a slab of clay-coloured sky and one end of a rusty-coloured cell block with its little barred windows. I stood looking out for a long time, telling myself I had better get used to the view.

IT WAS nice to get my shoe laces back. I accompanied the two big coppers out to the police car which waited in the yard and got in the back. There was a little jerk at my heart-strings as I found Inspector Butters sitting in the corner opposite. His stare was cold and grim.

'Hope you've been comfortable, Morris.'

He didn't sound as though he meant it so I gave him a sweetly Christian smile. 'The rest has done me good. I think I shall come again next year.'

The prison gates opened for us and we drove out on to Brixton Hill and turned right. The two large uniformed men hadn't come with us; there was a plain-clothes man in front with the driver and we were alone in the back. It struck me that Butters must feel very sure of himself or else he was trying something on. I wasn't even handcuffed. Reading my thoughts, he said gruffly, 'Do me a favour and *don't* try jumping for it. It wastes my time.'

We went straight through Streatham High Street and I cocked an interrogative eyebrow. 'Going for a bit of a run round? This isn't the way to court.'

'I know it,' he snapped. Then, as if that constituted sufficient explanation. 'Arthur Patch has vanished.'

'Oh-ho,' I said slowly, 'Valuable Crown witness gone for a Burton. You should have paid more heed to what I told you. Bet you don't find him.'

'You do, eh? And why?'

'I just happened to mention that tape-recording to your buddy, George Smith. It looks as though he's started covering up.'

He didn't argue this time but shifted about in his seat, stared moodily out of the window. 'Speaking of the tape-recording,' I went on after a while, 'did you do anything about it? Or is it still a naughty story I dreamed up?'

'I saw your friend Fairbrass. He seemed very fond of you; said he hoped they topped you. He wouldn't say a thing about your recording; didn't admit it, didn't deny it. He referred us to General Fletcher instead. So I contacted him by phone last night.'

'Yes? Well, go on, for Christ's sake.'

'So,' snarled Butters, 'it seems that there might be something in your story after all. He wouldn't say much over the phone; promised to tell us what he knew if we saw him personally today. So that's where we're going.'

I leaned back in my seat. A great wave of excitement and incredulous hope was straining my chest. To cover up, I remarked. 'Bad luck. You sound awfully disappointed.'

'Don't be a damned fool.' After a moment he continued in a tone of grudging admission. 'It's nothing personal; just that I used to know George Smith pretty well before he left the Force. We were sergeants together at one time. He was a pretty good man.'

I lit a cigarette. Butters's last remarks had made it pretty obvious that he had made up his mind. I was in the clear. The General, I decided benevolently, wasn't such a bad old bastard after all. Dotty, of course, but sound at heart. Even dear old Charles Fairbrass had his points: the way he had kept quiet about the shooting of Stefan, for example; although, of course, the fact that Stefan had fired first might have had something to do with it.

At Gatwick Airport we turned in and I saw a helicopter

standing a little way out. It was waiting for us. The General was still in residence at Long Hall and Butters didn't want to waste time. None was wasted. Within minutes we were going up as though on the end of an invisible cable. I looked down at the buildings and cars shrinking to toy size beneath us, across at the great sprawl of London, silent now, and inscrutable, ahead at the fields and hills unrolled in front of us and thought about Esther. It was then that I began to feel scared. Things were working out too well. It couldn't possibly be as smooth as this. What would go wrong?

The run-in to the airfield took us close to Long Hall so that we looked down from a couple of thousand feet on the cold, empty shell of past magnificence. A car was waiting with a couple of uniformed men and I deduced from this as we set off that Butters was hoping to get the whole thing sewn up. We turned in through the great gateway, up the drive and pulled up at the bottom of the familiar steps. The uniformed men remained in the car. Butters, the plain-clothes man and I mounted to the door and the plain-clothes man tugged at the bell-pull.

It was Charles who opened the door. Our eyes met briefly, neither of us said anything. He was looking unmistakeably unhappy but the fact meant nothing to me now. I was no longer bothered about Charles, or anyone else in that gang. Even Andy Phillips, had I met him, might have got away with nothing worse than a busted nose.

No explanations were needed. Charles stepped aside and said, 'The General is waiting for you in the library.'

He led the way there, knocked and, when the General's voice said, 'Come in,' opened the door and announced, 'The police are here, sir.' He stood aside again for us to enter and closed the door behind us, staying outside himself.

General Fletcher was sitting in an armchair by the fire, clad in an old tweed jacket, flannels and sweater, a glass in

his hand. He put it down as we entered and stood up, erect and guardsmanlike as ever.

'Good morning, gentlemen.' He favoured me with a curt inclination, his old keen glance, colder now. 'Morris.'

'Inspector Butters, sir,' the Inspector introduced himself. 'May I thank you, to begin with, for arranging to see us so promptly?'

'There's no need, Inspector. To see you at once was the proper course for me as a citizen. One shouldn't consider oneself to be granting a favour by simply doing one's duty.'

'I can only wish more people realized that, sir,' said Butters ingratiatingly. The General nodded earnestly.

'So do I, Inspector, so do I.'

I lit a cigarette, smothered a grin and fought down the impulse to say, 'Scratch yer back, sir?'

'Well, sir, we don't want to waste your time,' went on Butters in a more businesslike tone, 'So, as you are aware of the purpose of our visit, shall we come straight to the point? We are engaged, as I told you, in investigation of the murder of Leslie Moran at the Roxy Club, Shepherd's Bush. Mr. Morris, here, has, in fact, been formally charged with the crime; but he claims that a certain tape-recording, of which I spoke to you, can throw a new light on the case. Now, sir, you gave me to understand that you can tell us something about that tape?'

The General nodded. 'Please be seated, gentlemen. Perhaps I may offer you something to drink?' The policemen both refused; I looked him in the eye and said, 'Thank you, sir; I'll have a Scotch.' This time he gazed back at me steadily, then, abruptly, smiled a wry smile. 'Help yourself, will you, Morris?' I did so while he sat down again and began talking.

'The murder investigation you speak of has been of interest to me because both the victim, Moran, and the accused,

Morris, were for a time members of the organization of which I was the head. Consequently, upon learning such facts as were made public and which pointed to Morris's guilt, I felt that my men could well play a part in the search for him. Some of the most reliable were sent to London for this purpose. They made their headquarters the offices of the Wooden Spoon Clubs, of which I am president. Two of them, late at night, went to the offices. One, Fairbrass, a very good man, had a—a hunch that the best way of finding Morris would be to sit still and wait for him to come to us. He proved only too right. Morris was already in the office; he had presumably gained entry by using keys which he had retained from the time when he worked there.'

He finished his drink and sat for a moment. I surmised that, born talker as he was, he wished to add dramatic tension to his tale. 'Morris, as I was already well aware, is a pretty tough egg. There was some—a certain amount of violence and the upshot of it was that he got clear away. He left certain things behind, however. One was a man; we eventually learned his identity: Arthur Patch. But he, too, cleared off as soon as he was in a fit condition. This took him some time because he had been very efficiently beaten senseless by Mr. Morris.'

Butters scowled briefly across at me. I looked bland. 'The other thing,' continued the General, 'was a tape which was in the process of being played back on the dictaphone. Charles Fairbrass heard the end of it, played it through again and concluded that the best course for him to follow would be to hand it over to me. This he duly did.'

He left his chair and began to pace around. 'At first I didn't know quite what to make of it. It seemed to be some sort of confession extracted by force by Morris from Patch. It then became clear that the confession, for what a confession obtained in that fashion is worth, accused two men, so far un-

suspected, of being guilty of the murder of Moran: my, er, friend and business colleague, Mr. Courtney Polaris, of whom you have probably heard; and an employee of his, Mr. George Smith. Frankly, I didn't know what to do. I had naturally no wish to involve Mr. Polaris in a business of this kind when the accusation on the tape might be quite groundless. Eventually I put the tape in a place of safety and tackled Mr. Polaris about it myself. He assured me that the whole thing was fantasy; and for a time I was disposed to let the matter rest there.'

'Let's be quite clear about this, shall we, General?' I put in. 'Polaris pointed out to you that if you turned in that tape to the police it would mean curtains for the Movement. No more solid financial backing.' I remembered Andy Phillips's phrase. 'You'd kill the goose that laid the golden eggs.'

His shoulders suddenly sagged. He went back to his chair and sat down heavily. 'Yes. That was the decision I had to make. Was it more important that the Movement should go on and triumph, or that a possible miscarriage of justice, the condemnation of an innocent man, should be avoided? For some time, I persuaded myself that the Movement was all-important. But I couldn't stifle my doubts. My mind was made up for me last night.'

He looked across at me. 'Mrs. Gannelain came to see me. I think we both owe her a debt of gratitude. She made me realize that the political movement by which I set such store would, if it triumphed, be founded on an intense personal tragedy for which I was not prepared to share the responsibility. I had, I realized begun to fall into the sin which I have so often attacked: lack of concern for individual people. So I decided to hand over the recording.'

He fell silent. I studied him curiously and asked, 'What will happen to your Movement now?' He spread his hands.

'It will go on. It won't be easy, of course; you can't do

much without money nowadays.' His shoulders straightened abruptly and he was his old self once more. 'That's half the trouble with this damn world. It's helped me sort out the sheep from the goats, anyway. I explained the situation to my people this morning and half of them have started dropping out already.'

Butters stood up. It was clear from his expression that he hadn't taken in more than half of what we had been saying about the Movement. 'Well, I repeat, sir, we're very grateful to you. I'm sure Mr. Morris will be, too. Now, perhaps you'll be good enough to let us have this celebrated tape-recording.'

The General gave him a startled glance. 'But—do you mean to say you haven't got it?'

I looked at Butters's blank face and cold began to seep into the pit of my stomach. The General stood up again, half irritated, half puzzled. 'But that's most odd. Mrs. Gannelain said most emphatically that it would be in your hands first thing this morning.'

'*What?*' I yelled. 'You gave it to her?'

My voice, and my expression made everybody jump. 'I hadn't really much alternative,' said the General. 'She was most insistent. It was obvious that she wouldn't rest content until she had got the thing between her hands. So I saw no harm in handing it to her for delivery.'

'Oh,' I cried. 'Oh, my God.'

My sheer and obvious terror was enough for Butters. He caught on at once. 'When did she leave?' he snapped. 'Last night? By car?' There was no subservience about him now. The General, too, was his familiar commanding self, the Jumping General once more.

'That's right. We'll get the details. Where's Fairbrass?' He stabbed a bell-push and turned to me. 'You think there may have been more violence?'

'Get Polaris,' I snarled, 'I'll wring it out of him.'

Butters waved a hand at me to calm down and spoke to his aide. 'Phone the Yard. Find out if she's turned up yet. If not, put out a call at once.'

As the plain-clothes man made for the door he called after him, 'And get those constables. I want Mr. Polaris in here at once.'

'And Smith,' I put in, 'he's the gun.'

'And Smith.'

The detective, going out, nearly collided with Fairbrass coming in. He took one look at the General and almost sprang to attention.

'Charles,' asked General Fletcher crisply, 'what time did Mrs. Gannelain leave here last night?'

'Approximately ten-thirty, sir,' he answered at once.

'Was she alone?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And what car was she driving?'

'It was a Ford Zephyr, sir. I'll have to get the number from the log book.'

'Do that quickly, will you?'

He wheeled and didn't quite sprint for the door. Inspector Butters gave me a level look. 'See here, Morris. It looks as though you're cleared of one murder charge; don't get yourself another. Leave Polaris to us.'

I didn't answer. Inspector Butters and the General were getting efficiently organized, the policeman with a sort of routine purposiveness, the soldier with an eager impatience that set him striding about the room as he waited for Charles to return. But I could feel myself going to pieces. My stomach was aching with tension and shock and all I could do was recall my fear in the helicopter. I had been right. For everything to turn out as well as it promised had been too much to hope for. By this time, an unemotional voice would

be giving the details through scores of police radios, cool, level eyes would be peering from windows of black cars; but it was too late; I *knew*.

Fairbrass and the detective came in together.

'She's not been seen, sir,' reported the latter, 'the call's going out now.'

'CA forty-eight ninety, sir,' said Charles. The inspector motioned to the plain-clothes man. 'Last seen driving a Ford Zephyr. Colour?'

'Yellow.'

'Number, CA 4890. Give them that as well. Have those men gone for Polaris?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Perhaps I can help there,' said the General. 'Charles, alert everybody. I want Mr. Polaris and Mr. Smith brought in here. If you have any trouble—well, you know what to do.'

Charles grinned. I knew he had never approved of Courtney Polaris. 'Yes, sir!'

'I wouldn't advise any rough stuff,' said Butters when Charles had already left. 'There's no evidence as yet. We don't even know if there's been a crime. Accident, possibly. They'll check the hospitals, in any case.'

'Evidence!' snorted the General. 'It all looks clear enough to me. Too damn clear. But if they've done that girl any harm I'll make them pay for it if it takes me until my dying day. Here, Morris, you don't look so good. Have another drink.'

I did as he suggested in silence. It was an absorbing business for him, I reflected bitterly. Nearly as much fun as a parachute assault.

Several centuries went by, punctuated by telephone calls as Inspector Butters widened the net and made the mesh smaller. Then Charles and the detective, who now seemed to be working in liaison, came back.

'Well, sir,' said Fairbrass, ruefully rubbing the back of his head. 'It looks as though the birds have flown.'

'What?' The General's chin jutted forward. 'Not here?'

'No sign of them, sir. And two cars are missing from the garage.'

'Christ Almighty,' fumed the Inspector, his patience abruptly dissolving. 'Not *another* bloody manhunt?'

'Looks like it, sir,' said the detective glumly. 'We've been all over the house and the chaps here are combing the grounds.'

'*God!* All right, get full descriptions from Mr. Fairbrass here, details of the cars, and put all that out as well.'

As they went out he looked at the General and sighed heavily. 'If you don't mind, sir, I think I'll stretch a point and have that drink after all. This may turn out to be quite a game. If two cars are gone, it looks as if they've split up. Unless, of course,' he added hopefully. 'It's an innocent business trip.'

The General preferred to look on the black side. 'Can't get away from the fact that the girl's missing.'

Butters shrugged and muttered again something about his fond hope, 'Accident.' Then he went on, 'I've been on to the local police station and I'm going to suggest we transfer our operations down there. We'll get information quicker that way. I take it you'd like to come, sir?'

'Indeed, yes. You won't keep me out of it now the hunt is up!'

I felt too exhausted even to feel ironical at the sporting pleasure General Fletcher was getting out of the murder of Esther by Courtney Polaris.

The Inspector and I rode to the station in the police car, the General following in his own with a couple of his men. It was a small, empty market town with a very wide, tree-lined main street and cattle pens at one end. The weather

was wintry again. I felt certain that I was going to vomit soon. The police station was small and new, built of red brick. As we pulled up a sergeant came running out, bare-headed.

'We've found them, sir.'

I opened my mouth wide, trying to suck in air. Butters got out to confer with the sergeant; I saw the latter waving directions. Another police car swung out from behind the station, pulled up with the engine idling. It was full of men. Butters went across to it. Then he came back, yanked the door open savagely and flung himself into his seat. He looked now in little better shape than I was.

'Follow them,' he snarled at the driver and we moved off at high speed. Butters was silent for a spell.

'Well,' he remarked at length in a tired voice, 'that's that. An open and shut case now; but another bloody, *bastard* murder.'

'It's my fault,' Inspector Butters was saying bitterly, 'I let it happen.'

'Don't see how you can be blamed,' I said, staring ahead.

'Ah, I had enough to go on. There were plenty of things wrong with the set-up at the Roxy. Why should Moran have wet himself if he'd been shot down suddenly in a scuffle as it appeared he had? If he'd been sitting under a gun for some time, as you claimed, that would account for it. Why did Patch have a sudden fit of heroism? Why was it we found the empty cartridge cases down in the alley instead of in the same room with the body? You had nothing to gain by picking them up and chucking them out, but if the shots had come from the bedroom and someone didn't want us to know that, then it made sense. Why were you so set on dragging Polaris into it? That kiddie who hid you told us you even spoke to her about him—that was why we turned up so promptly

when you raided Long Hall. I had a hunch you'd head there. But I couldn't believe—or, rather, didn't want to believe—that it could have been George. So now we have another killing.'

There was a squad car drawn up at the side of the road and a uniformed man beside it. Our small convoy—the two police cars and the General's Daimler—drew in behind it and we all got out. We were on a wide stretch of bleak, deserted heathland and pasture; except that, below a steep bank which fell away from the road, there was a tumble-down cottage with people standing about it. Stuck, rather than parked, against one wall was a yellow Ford Zephyr. I could see the wheel marks where it had been run down the bank.

I took the bank at a leap and made for the ruined building but before I reached it I heard her voice call.

'Clem!'

She was sitting in the Zephyr, out of the wind. I started to get in as she made to get out so that we practically tumbled together on to the driving seat. Eventually we sorted ourselves out and hung on to each other tightly.

'What happened?' I asked at last.

'I started back for London last night. They must have had their eyes open. Smith chased me in another car. I saw him coming and guessed what it was. So, at a point I could remember, a big oak by a hump-backed bridge, I slung the tape-recording out. It's still there. He caught me, ran me into the side, brought me up here. But, of course, he couldn't find the tape. I wouldn't tell him where it was. I've been here all night. He didn't hurt me. He almost cried. Then, this morning, Court came. He guessed what I'd done. Then he pointed out that I was now the only person in the world who knew where it was. So, they could make sure no one would ever know. George didn't like it.' Her face grew solemn. 'They're in there.'

We got out of the car and went into the cottage. There were no windows and in one place the floorboards had rotted away. George Smith was squatting in a corner, shivering, a policeman's greatcoat around his shoulders. I hardly recognized him. Inspector Butters, hands in pockets, stood looking down at him sadly. Other policemen were moving around.

A strange, piping voice was saying, 'Well, I had to do it, didn't I? Murdering women, on top—top of everything else. Lucky for her I was here.'

It was George Smith talking. Inspector Butters sighed and said in a gentle, melancholy voice, 'Yes, George, he got what he asked for.'

Against one wall something was lying with police capes covering it. I heard someone outside say, 'Doctor's on his way.'

George made a wheezing noise and stood up. Tears were oozing down his puffy cheeks. 'It's been hard.' He repeated it several times. 'It's been hard. This time I had enough.'

'Don't blame you, George,' said Inspector Butters. He put a hand on the other's arm. 'Oh, well, let's go and get things cleared up, eh?'

A thin drizzle was starting to fall as we went back to the road. An ambulance and another car were approaching. I kept a tight hold of Esther. 'Come on, chick. Time you were in bed.'

'Is it hell! We're going back for the tape-recording. Even if we find we don't need it any longer we can keep it as a souvenir. Just a minute.'

Smith, stooping like an old man, was getting into the leading police car. I could understand why he had risked his life up on the parapet that night: a forlorn effort to win back the soul he had sold. Esther ran up to him, took hold of his arm and said something or other, it didn't matter what. He

smiled at her vaguely then turned away. There was a uniformed superintendent on the scene and it appeared that General Fletcher knew him quite well. They were planted side by side on the road, standing at ease while two men carried a stretcher past them, going into the cottage to bear away the remains of the dead spider.

'A damned nasty business,' the superintendent was saying emphatically. The car with George Smith inside it started up and they both turned their heads to watch it drive away.

'Yes,' went on the superintendent, 'it's going to knock the markets sideways. Thank God my money's in Consols.'

The rain started to come down in earnest. I hoped the superintendent would get very wet indeed.

